

A welcome addition

NEW RESTAURANT

In Italy Bar Ristorante
38 Craig Road
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A FUNNY thing happens when you're a chef at this Italian restaurant called Forlino in One Fullerton. Maybe the upscale, Baroque-like decor with its theatrical touches gets to you, but after some time, you seem to feel the urge to break out and open a simple trattoria.

The last time Forlino had a chef with the same name, he left to do just that with his namesake eatery Osvaldo, before moving on to open his highly successful No Menu. He's since branched out to more sophisticated digs with the likes of Amarone - designed for the corporate set - but his food is still down-to-earth, focusing on simple plating and tasty cooking.

The next chef to do the same is Mario Caramella, who held the fort at Forlino until recently, when the Deliciae Group took over the restaurant from original owner Beppe de Vito. In a surprise move, Caramella took over the premises left by the now-defunct Italian eatery Arno in a pretty, white-washed conservation shophouse in Craig Road.

Opened officially just last week, In Italy seems good to go, apart from a few service inconsistencies. The location itself is an attractive one, blessed with its own courtyard so there's an alfresco dining area and pleasant garden ambience. Inside, it's all Mediterranean rustic from the happy riot of warm colours and simple fittings like sofas instead of banquettes and a cosy bar counter you can eat at that actually looks comfortable.

The food? No fancy platings here. Just wholesome, toothsome cooking inspired by a medley of Italian regions. Caramella - somewhat portly and exuding a no-nonsense air as he purposefully makes his rounds of the restaurant floor to ensure that all is well - is nonetheless approachable and more than happy to talk about his food.

He tells you, for example, that the house special, gran bollito (\$28) - a kind of Italian pot-au-feu of mixed meats and sausage - is served with different dips depending on which part of Italy it's served in. But here, he offers a range of sauces from parsley and horseradish to tomato and even candied fruit in syrup. The fruit is supposed to have a slightly spicy mustard kick, but Caramella is annoyed that the batch he ordered is kick-less, so he plans to have a word with his supplier.

For the diner who is none the wiser, the sweet sticky syrup goes surprisingly well with the meaty,



PHOTOS BY YEN MENG JIN

Simple and honest cooking: Caramella (main picture, centre) working with his team. House special gran bollito (right) and home-made squid ink pasta smothered with a garlicky, briny sauce (above)



boiled goodness of beef, chicken, veal tongue and delicious fatty pork sausage cooked to fall-apart tenderness in a savoury broth. Even though some of the meat was inevitably stringy, the tongue, sausage and beef shank were flavourful especially with the condiments.

But before this, you should work your way through the complimentary basket of beer bread. Imagine a tender, flaky version of curry puff pastry deep fried into rectangular shapes crimped at the edges, arriving piping hot on your table. Tear into them quickly and dip into the accompanying salsa verde. You must eat them before they get cold because these Cinderellas of the bread world turn into insipid dough rags once their temperature drops. Otherwise, this is a prime contender for best bread basket in town.

Indulge your carbo craving further with the crostino (\$18) a puffy-crispy flatbread topped with melted taleggio cheese, endive and a shower of prosciutto slices that

makes a capable alternative to pizza.

We were less enamoured with an appetiser of slow cooked tuna and cannellini beans with mixed greens (\$16). While the combination seemed decent enough, the overly sharp vinaigrette tipped it off balance.

Pasta-wise, Caramella's home-made squid ink pasta (\$18) is smothered with a garlicky, briny sauce flavoured with bottarga and topped with a generous amount of fresh, translucent prawns with a good bite to them. At this price, it's excellent value. In fact, one of In Italy's biggest pluses would be its wallet-friendly pricing, with the most expensive dish clocking in at \$18.

The downside to this is that you get a limited selection of mains that are confined to braised meat dishes and one grouper main course.

For dessert, the Italian torta (\$8) or chocolate cake is a dense slice of chocolate brownie-like confection that doesn't hit any high

notes. Go instead for the zabaglione (\$12), an addictive concoction of biscuit crumbs topped with vanilla ice cream and covered with a blanket of slightly warm sabayon. It exemplifies the kind of simple but honest cooking that In Italy is all about.

The question of course, is whether we really need yet another Italian eatery. Caramella is not breaking any new ground, but at such sensible pricing and pleasant surroundings, this new addition is a pretty welcome one.

Overall rating: 7/10

By Jain.e &c

WHAT OUR RATINGS MEAN

- 10: The ultimate dining experience
- 9-9.5: Sublime
- 8-8.5: Excellent
- 7-7.5: Good to very good
- 6-6.5: Promising
- 5-5.5: Average