

Camillo's Cafe in Princeton is a gem

by Teresa Politano/For The Star-Ledger

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*Camillo's Cafe, Princeton Shopping Center, 301 North Harrison St. Princeton. (609) 252-0608. camilloscafe.net Hours: Lunch: 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays. Dinner: 5 p.m.-10 p.m. Mondays- Saturdays; 5 p.m.-9 p.m. Sundays. Area: Mercer County **THREE STARS***

You know you're in Princeton when the philosophy of the restaurant is summed up by a Virginia Woolf quote: "One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well." And, as always, Woolf knows of what she speaks.

Camillo's Cafe is a lively bit of real estate in the otherwise sleepy and somewhat oversized Princeton Shopping Center, which itself is not your typical compilation of New Jersey strip mall shops. We're not quite sure what the philosophy of the shopping center is meant to be, but the collection of its unusual mishmash of stores won't really matter once you're inside this cozy bistro.

Here the philosophy is clear -- passionate and authentic Italian cooking, with an emphasis on fresh ingredients. Chef Camillo Tortola was raised in Miranda, Italy, and was inspired by the food of his grandmother -- indeed, some of the recipes here come straight from her kitchen. The whole point is to dine well. The atmosphere is warm and lively (hardwood floors, warm lighting, wooden tables and hand-painted murals). Staff is erudite and efficient -- perhaps some attend the local university? All of which contribute positively to the overall experience. Dine well we did.

Marinated artichokes wrapped in prosciutto (\$14) was a special of the evening, and we were quite impressed. These almost looked like lamb chops when they arrived on the plate, the whole vegetable delicately wrapped in a dark and musky slice of prosciutto. What a welcome change from the typical artichoke dish. Delicious.

A shrimp and scallop appetizer (\$15) was not typical either; here the seafood was prepared in a white wine, garlic and tomato sauce, but pepperoncino peppers gave it a bit of a kick.

Risotto (\$22) is a signature dish, and on this night was prepared with a ratatouille. The risotto was rich, creamy with a nice luscious hint of cheese, but the ratatouille seemed too mundane to accompany such a first-string dish.

Pastas are handmade, and we opted for the pappardelle with sweet sausage (\$18). Pappardelle is always described as ribbon pasta, but, honestly, this is the first time we've ever had pappardelle thin enough to be compared to a ribbon. Our waiter said this is a light entree, which seemed hard to believe given the pasta, the sausage and the sauce. But he was accurate; this was delicate and lusty.

Our waiter also recommended the filet of beef (\$26), and he was right again. It arrived rare and velvety, served with broccoli rabe.

Be sure to have desserts (\$8); pastry chef Karen Angelica Zorn came herself to the table and described them. (Chef Tortola makes a point to visit his guests as well.) The lavender chocolate mousse (\$8) was downright luscious, rich and dense with just a hint of lavender to broaden the taste. Tiramisu (\$8) -- Grandma's recipe -- was nicely bold and dense, and you could actually taste the rich mascarpone. Such a welcome departure from the ubiquitously wimpy version of this dessert.

Italian bistros in Jersey strip malls are a dime a dozen -- most, too, will boast authenticity and uniqueness. Camillo's Cafe is one that fulfills the promise.