

From **THE SANTA FE NEW MEXICAN**

Headline: SIDE DISH: A TASTY TRIP DOWN MEMORY LANE

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It had been years since I dined at **Pranzo Italian Grill** (984-2645) -- partially because I worked there for almost 10 years, so it was weird to dine there as a guest, and partially because I wanted to let new owner Michael O'Reilly settle in a bit.

A change in ownership for a popular, established restaurant is always tricky. The challenge is figuring out how much of the old concepts to keep and how much to throw out. And O'Reilly has had his hands full. He has gone through three executive chefs that I am aware of; the last one packed up his knives a little more than a month ago.

But I am happy to report I had a very nice dinner there recently -- great service and yummy food without the benefit of an executive chef running the show.

I did see one of the longtime lead cooks that I had worked with still manning the stoves. Let's face it: The line cooks down in the trenches are the ones doing the hard work of recreating the dishes the "chef" has designed, and this Pranzo kitchen team is doing a great job.

A bruschetta -- crisply toasted baguette slices served with four toppings for spreading (\$9.95) -- was a quick starter that made us instantly happy since we had arrived starving. There are small cups of roasted puréed garlic, basil pesto, artichoke relish and a mascarpone and herb spread that all mix well together as you dip and nibble.

The Caesar salad that accompanied my pasta order was slightly underdressed, but our attentive waiter swiftly brought me more dressing. My linguini alla carbonara (\$16.95) had a rich, creamy Parmesan sauce with a nice hint of white wine and enough bacon to kill a horse; perhaps my friends in the kitchen were trying to spoil me.

My date's cozze con finnocchio appetizer (\$10.95) was an ample portion enjoyed as her main course. It was loaded with garlic, black mussels, saffron, fennel and the unannounced addition of more bacon -- an oversight by the kitchen, our server admitted -- but we gobbled it all up regardless.

O'Reilly sure knows his wines; he worked in the industry for many years.

Pours are offered in two sizes, 6.3 ounces and 9 ounces. A 2005 Talbott Chardonnay (\$11.95/\$15.95) competed successfully with the garlicky broth on the mussels, and a simple and affordable 2004 Straccali Chianti (\$5.45/\$7.95) was just fine with my pasta.

For dessert we shared a bowl of F.X. O'Reilly Vietnamese Cinnamon ice cream that was delicious and packed quite a kick, a sort of creamy "red hots" flavor that cleared our bacon-glazed palates.

As we went to press, I learned that Antonio Mendoza, who had been working in the position of sous chef, has been promoted to chef since my dinner at Pranzo. I commend O'Reilly for promoting from within.

