

Monterey County Herald

Barbara Mossberg, Table Talk: Monterey's Paluca Trattoria feels like home

By Barbara Mossberg

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Paluca Trattoria on Fisherman's Wharf in Monterey. (Courtesy of Raul Nava)

MONTEREY >> You do not need to be a smart tourist (no tourist is hapless who comes to the Peninsula) to go to Paluca Trattoria. Although you might assume so, because it's on Monterey's iconic Fisherman's Wharf.

It's an excuse to experience what seems like something out of Italy or Portugal, this restaurant with two sides hanging out over the wharf. A tourist destination/trap? That was the question.

The night we came, it was a dazzling Strawberry Moon, the rare event of an exceptionally full bright moon on a clear June night. The restaurant serves until 9 p.m., and my son's train was late. The man who answered the phone told us, "We'll wait for you." That was our first clue that this is a place you feel improbably at home.

It was amore at first sight, the moon hitting our eye like a bright pizza pie. The lights from Monterey shimmered, the hills were dark, the air fresh with sea, and sounds of waves and seals and gulls.

We were told we could be served outside under the moonlight until we wanted to come inside for warmth. We sipped cappuccino (served with biscotti) while we read the menu.

The second clue to the homey nature of this place is that we were greeted by the man who answered the phone so graciously. His name is Sal, he's owned the restaurant 20 years; it's named for his son, and photos of his family from Sicily are on the walls. His father, known to all as "Momo," is an old-school Monterey fisherman.

So what I'm saying is that he's local, and his restaurant, however perfectly positioned resort-style for the Great Night, serves fresh, local, family-style food in a relaxed and warm — if also environmentally thrilling and historic — setting, where Steinbeck or Ricketts could appear any minute.

Start with Pomodoro Bruschetta (\$8.95), a tray of warm grilled bread topped by a bouquet of fresh garlic, tasty tomatoes, basil, lemon, Sicilian olive oil, arugula and Parmesan — warm and cold, crusty and smooth, enough to share. You should, because you're going to need room for Linguini Aglio e Olio, a steaming bowl of slippery noodles with sautéed garlic, Sicilian olive oil, Italian parsley and chili flake (\$12.95). This is a seemingly simple, very difficult dish to get right, and they did.

We also ordered the Lobster Ravioli with fontina cheese, in a caper garlic cream sauce (\$19.85). The large firm capers make for a briny, luscious sauce.

Gnocchi potato dumplings stuffed with spinach and ricotta in a basil pesto cream sauce (\$16.95) was homemade and fresh: soft, large, creamy, delicious. My son, who's been general manager of a famous New York Italian restaurant — and is very critical — pronounced it "perfect." "Sensational," he added.

We also had Linguini con Cozze Spanish mussels, in a Chardonnay-garlic-butter-chili flake marinara (\$17.95). I left most of this, to better eat the fried artichoke hearts (\$7.95) in light beer batter with ranch dressing.

You know I had dessert (all right, three). We had the profiteroles, the cannoli, the crepes — they are all homemade, from family tradition, sweet, warm, cold. But I was a little full, so I took some home, and ate them for a midnight snack.

I would go back tomorrow, at lunch, and sit on the wharf, and think, This is my real life. And yes, that's Frank Sinatra doing the soundtrack. P.S. If it's raining, sit inside at one of the cozy tables, and look out on the scene, because the walls are glass.

Paluca Trattoria

Where: 6 Fisherman's Wharf, Monterey

Hours: 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily

Information: 373-5559, www.palucatrattoria.com