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“Luciano's does it the right way in Rahway” - Teresa Politano

If you haven't found yourself in Rahway recently, you'll be surprised by the ever-increasing reasons to go. This is a city on a quest to become a vibrant community, full of urban artists and commuters, with all the energy that entails. It stands to reason, then, that the restaurant scene would enjoy an invigorating renaissance as well.

One of those vibrant dinner scenes is at Luciano's, an almost cavernous restaurant just around the corner from the beautifully renovated Union County Arts Center.

Co-owner Michael Merlis says Luciano's is, in part, a re-creation of a childhood memory. Merlis grew up in Colonia, and remembers going to The Fulton, a Rahway restaurant where dinner jackets were required. When he decided to build in Rahway, he wanted a destination restaurant that would attract customers from surrounding neighborhoods. Dinner jackets are not required here, but Luciano's does evoke a more stylish and genteel time.

Merlis and his partner Henry Koszalka brought in as executive chef Joseph Mastrella, who had worked at Arthur's Landing and at the Hilton in Short Hills and opened Luciano's in late January.

We often get nervous when a restaurant is so big. Luciano's seats more than 300. Usually the food suffers when so many are being fed. We needn't have worried; there was not a mediocre dish on the table. Many items are Italian classics, but the menu also includes creations like veal and sage ravioli and lobster papardelle. This is a great place to bring family and friends for a really good white-tablecloth meal at fairly reasonable prices.

The pear and mesclun salad (\$7) proved an auspicious start. This salad comes with toasted pecans and herbs in a sherry vinaigrette. Pears have such a short shelf life at that perfectly ripe stage that it's tough to get a salad with one that's perfect. This one was. On the more traditional front, fried zucchini (\$7), usually not a personal favorite, was light and delicious. The marinara was zesty but not heavy. Also easy to recommend was the fresh mozzarella and roasted peppers (\$8); these peppers went quickly. But the best appetizer, hands down, was the citrus hearts of palm and shaved fennel (\$7). What a fresh, creative start to the meal.

Our dinners were generous but, thankfully, not heavy. Even the chicken scarpariello (\$17) didn't overwhelm, which, in a dish with chicken, sausage and potatoes, is tough to pull off. Both the veal saltimbocca (\$19) and the shrimp francaise (\$21) were honest renditions, well prepared and solidly good. For the more adventurous, the sea bass (\$19), was light and moist; it arrived at the table practically ready for a cover photo, topped as it was with a fava bean and plum tomato ragout and a saffron cream broth. The ragout and broth were just as delicious as they looked.

The restaurant didn't fail at dessert (\$7.50); the tiramisu, the flourless chocolate cake and trios of ice cream all were clearly made and presented with care.

Luciano's might be big (with a big, bold bar to match) but the Tuscan style decor is warm. Despite a near-capacity crowd, we were treated like VIPs.

The busy nights, Merlis says, are typical; he's been pleased. (Reservations are recommended on weekends.) This fall, when big names hit the arts center (Engelbert Humperdinck and Connie Francis are on the schedule), Merlis expects even more people to re-discover the town and sit at one of the tables that not so recently would have been in a vacant lot.

"They can't believe," Merlis says, "they're in Rahway."