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Food

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La Morra in Brookline Village, the Sicilian rice balls called arancini are stuffed with salami and cheese.

By Alison Arnett
GLOBE STAFF

A year ago, if a waiter mentioned the dish arancini, balls of crunchy rice, most restaurantgoers might have looked up blankly while they wondered whether to order grilled squid. Now these golden, fried morsels, decided by thrifty Sicilians to use up leftover risotto, grace tables at many of the new Italian restaurants in town.

We are swimming in a sea of Italian. Eat out every night for a week at a new or fairly new restaurant and you could order all risotto all the time. More than a dozen trattoria-style places have opened or are planned, from the South End to Southborough. In a world that's often threatening and in an economy that can still seem shaky, some say, diners are looking for familiar dishes — and nothing fits the bill better than thin pizza from a wood-fueled oven or a plate of homemade pasta. In fact, as one restaurant consultant muses, Americans are getting to the point where they can pronounce the word "trattoria."

If you want Italian food, start at La Morra in Brookline Village, where Sunday nights draw a neighborhood crowd. Then stop by the chic Piattini Wine Bar and you'll see its South End neighbors every night of the week. Go to Rustic Kitchen in Porter Square for raw delicacies from the "oysteria" menu and a tasty pizza from the wood-fired oven, and to Umbria, downtown, where cooks dressed in black offer house-made pasta and pancetta. Tomasso's Trattoria in Southborough may seem to some like a jaunt, but not to the 495 crowd, who find small plates with intense flavors. Weekends are jammed at Neptune Oyster, a hip newcomer to the North End, but what's better than feeling part of the in crowd? Or settle into the snazzy Sorriso in the Leather District, opened by Ian Just and adjacent to his French Les Zygomates.

Why the flood of Italian? Talk to restaurateurs and different rationales are proffered. Just, who opened Les Zygomates a decade ago — when there were few stylish places to eat in the Leather

District — gives both practical and aesthetic reasons for making Sorriso's menu Italian. Aiming for out-of-town clientele as well as those who live in the neighborhood, Just decided that Italian cuisine was beloved enough to attract them. "I'm down here in a neighborhood with really nothing else," he says. He didn't want another French restaurant next door, and "I didn't think Greek would bring people in from the suburbs."

But his heart also dictated Italian. "I'm amazed what [Italian winemakers] are doing with wine right now," he says. At Sorriso, it's not unusual to see patrons eating a \$10 pizza at the bar and sipping a \$50 Tuscan bottle. "That wasn't part of the business plan," Just admits, though he's delighted.

Lorenzo Savona, a former co-owner of Les Zyg, left for other projects in 2002. Now general manager of Tomasso's Trattoria, which is owned by Tom and Mary

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Prince, Savona says the restaurant "has been a 10-year quest." The kind of food he knew from his family wasn't being offered in the Boston area, he says. He recalls noonday meals in Calabria, where his family is from. Small course would follow small course, all intensely flavorful and together making up the long meal. "Good Italian cooking is about flavor," says Savona.

The Southborough trattoria is built around this idea, with small portions, the best ingredients, and "not fussing with [them] too much," says Savona. The concept shines in chef Tony Bettencourt's pappardelle with braised rabbit and green olives. The small dish idea was a challenge at first, says Savona, who admits it was "scary" when customers asked for chicken Parm and larger portions of pasta. Now diners come in to try many flavors and sample Savona's stylish wine list.

The new Italian model, says

Bret Thorn, food editor of Nation's Restaurant News, fits "into a big food trend focusing on ingredients." If the products are good enough, they can go to the table relatively unadorned — the real Italian way. The concept also fits into the tendency of many diners — especially younger ones — to stay away from a filling three-course meal, Thorn adds. As for the dishes themselves, Italian cuisine is such a draw that even non-Italian restaurants offer pasta and risotto, says Harry Balzer of NPD Group, which tracks eating trends. They're "the top foods in America," he says.

With so much of the menu already familiar, diners will try new things. Clark Wolf, a New York-based restaurant consultant, says that where French cuisine can seem stuffy or too rich, "if you say Italian, everybody just smiles." For the restaurateur, that translates into flexibility. Food can get more elaborate if the economy rises or simpler if it falls, says Wolf. And with so many outstanding ingredi-

ents coming into markets from Italy and many chefs making their own pastas and curing meats, an authenticity and sophistication exists today that was not possible earlier.

That authenticity has something to do with well-traveled diners, who seek out the ingredients they enjoyed in a trattoria in Rome, for instance. All these products come with higher price tags than they used to. At the North End's Salumeria Italiana, co-owner Gaetano Martignetti says transportation costs, security, and a deflated dollar all contribute to this. But exceptional products are more accessible than ever, he says. His wholesale restaurant clients range from Locke-Ober to small North End eateries such as Carmen. The online business (www.salumeriaitaliana.com) draws fans from as far away as Seward, Alaska.

Continuing in the quest for light tomato sauces, simple grilled chops, thin smoky pizzas, and bowls of creamy risotto, you could drop by Picco (the name stands for

You found a new place? It must be Italian

Star-studded dishes

Ingredients at all the new Italian restaurants are similar, as are specialties on the menus. Chefs are curing their own salami and other meats. At Umbria downtown, you can order prosciutto and salami served with cheeses and

For local diners and restaurateurs, everything's coming up risotto and arancini

By Alison Arnett



Picco, which stands for "Pizza and Ice Cream Company," is a casual spot on Tremont Street owned by Rick Katz, formerly of Legal Sea Foods and Bentonwood Bakery.

"Pizza and Ice Cream Company"), a casual spot on Tremont Street owned by Rick Katz, formerly of Legal Sea Foods and Bentonwood Bakery. Or try Italian-by-way-of-Manchester-England at Croma, another informal place on Newbury Street with plenty of wines by the glass and a favorite sticky toffee pudding dessert (that's the English showing through). Head to Pomodoro in Brookline Village, the sibling of the North End's Pomodoro, where a chic, minimalist look and the hearty dishes captivate diners.

More are coming. Domani Bar & Trattoria is scheduled to open this month. With Rene Michelena as chef and co-owner, along with Brian Lesser as co-owner, this restaurant next door to the restaurant/nightclub Saint promises cutting-edge fare. Others are still on the drawing board. Former blue chef Dante deMagistris has something in the works. Joseph Tinnirello, former chef of Terramia, who helped open Piattini Wine Bar, is looking to open his own place. In May, Marisa Iocco and the team at Bricco and Umbria will welcome diners to the North End's Mare (the word means "ocean" and the menu is seafood). And Anthony Susi of Sage hopes to

move into a larger space within the year.

The next time you're in the mood for arancini, you won't have far to go.

Croma, 269 Newbury St., 617-247-3200; La Morra, 48 Boylston St., Brookline Village, 617-739-0007; Neptune Oyster Bar, 63 Salem St. (North End), 617-742-3474; Piattini Wine Bar, 162 Columbus Ave. (South End), 617-

423-2021; Picco, 513 Tremont St. (South End), 617-927-0066; Pomodoro, 24 Harvard St., Brookline Village, 617-566-4455; Rustic Kitchen, 1815 Massachusetts Ave. (Porter Square), Cambridge, 617-354-7766; Sorriso, 107 South St. (Leather District), 617-259-1560; Tomasso's Trattoria, 154 Turnpike Road (Route 9), Southborough, 508-481-8484; Umbria, 295 Franklin St., 617-338-1000.