

Undici Taverna Rustica -- Reviewed

Published: Monday, July 26, 2010, 9:47 AM Updated: Monday, July 26, 2010, 9:58 AM



Art Namendorf

Undici Taverna Rustica

11 West River Road
Rumson, New Jersey
(732) 842-3880

By The Artful Diner
July 26, 2010



The building that now domiciles **Undici** (which means "eleven" in Italian, after the establishment's address at 11 West River Road) was, since 1934, home to a Rumson mainstay, the Hook, Line & Sinker. But what was a casual neighborhood eatery and happy-tappy has been transformed into a replica of a rustic Tuscan farmhouse replete with attractive rectangular bar, massive beams, wide-planked floors, medieval archways, and plethora of brick and stone.

The restaurant -- which is owned by the family of designer Pamela Diaco, who is responsible for the interior décor, and Victor Rallo, proprietor of the immensely popular Basil T's Brewery and Italian Grill in nearby Red Bank -- boasts not only a decidedly upscale ambiance but a menu of pricey innovative Italian offerings and (an equally pricey) all-Italian wine list that is just slightly more diminutive in scope than *War and Peace*. Pricey the cuisine may be... but it is up to the mark in every respect -- as is the service -- and provides a treat for the eye as well as the palate.

Salads are a class act and the perfect prelude to your meal. The *pomodoro*, for example, intersperses thick slices of grilled ripe tomato and sections of mozzarella, sprinkles them with sea salt and cracked black pepper, and then throws in a splash of Ligurian olive oil and wedge of perfectly grilled country bread. The result is simply and sublimely delicious.

The roasted beet salad is a more sophisticated presentation and an eye pleaser as well. Thinly sliced

golden beets serve as a foundation for an open dome of red beets containing a luscious tangle of arugula and red onion embraced by a combo of red wine vinegar and extra-virgin olive oil. The crowning touch is a tiara of Coach Farms goat cheese. Everything is in harmony.... The beets are perfectly roasted, the arugula is pristinely fresh, the vinaigrette is light but just assertive enough to complement the peppery greenery, and the dollop of creamy goat cheese provides a delightful textural contrast.

On the other hand, if you're incurably carnivorous, you will find it nearly impossible to resist the considerable charms of the superlative *bresaola*. Air-dried salted filet mignon is sliced wafer thin and then anointed with extra-virgin olive oil and lemon juice. A sprinkling of freshly grated *Parmigiano-Reggiano* provides the consummatory touch, as do shavings of fresh artichoke. Incomparably addictive.

When it comes time to select your main course, you will find that there are just enough printed possibilities (plus a limited number of daily specials) to peak your interest without causing your brain the anxieties of over-choice.

Matters piscatorial predominate here; so if you happen to be a seafood lover, this is the perfect spot to indulge. The East Coast halibut, for example, is teamed with plump clams, fresh artichokes, red potatoes, tincture of garlic & parsley, and a first-rate broth tinged with extra-virgin olive oil.

The grilled salmon, a daily special, was particularly noteworthy. For starters, it was cooked through -- not translucent at the core -- precisely as I prefer it and precisely as ordered. It was then teamed with ratatouille and finished with a light white wine sauce and splash of balsamic.

When it is available, meat lovers can't go wrong with the osso buco, a benchmark effort... However, such quality comes with quite a price tag attached. At \$45.00, it will put a significant dent in your wallet. On the other hand, the succulent roasted baby chicken and classic pork chop Milanese priced at \$26.00 and \$36.00, respectively, both highly recommended, will treat your budget more kindly.

Without question, dining at **Undici** can be an expensive proposition. But the restaurant also offers some more reasonable alternatives. The handmade pizzas are excellent and all are priced in the mid-teens. And the pastas, which are house-made and exquisitely prepared and presented, do not exceed the \$24.00 mark. The "ruffled" fettuccine comes with a sumptuous slow braised meat sauce and topping of ricotta cheese; sautéed eggplant is teamed with Jersey tomato sauce, fresh basil, hand-rolled mozzarella and *parmigiano*, and then baked in the oven and served with rigatoni *pomodoro*; and the simple but seductive house-made spaghetti is companioned by fresh zucchini, caramelized onion, and fresh tomatoes with a splash of extra-virgin olive oil.

Desserts, all \$9.00, are more than worth the added expenditure. The lemon-glazed zucchini & walnut cake is served with lemon mascarpone gelato and fresh cream; the house-made biscotti arrives with cannoli cream and Nutella mascarpone for your dipping pleasure; and the chocolate tart is embraced by a crispy polenta crust.

The only down side of dining at **Undici** is the noise. Hard surfaces of wood and stone conspire to form the consummate acoustical nightmare. And on a free-for-all Friday or Saturday evening when the place is packed, the decibel level can be frighteningly formidable. Our server literally had to shout to make herself heard over the conversational din... On the other hand, lunch on a quiet Wednesday or Thursday can be an unmitigated joy.

Cuisine: Casual and Contemporary Italian

Hours: Mon - Thurs, open at 4:00 p.m.; Weds - Sun, open at 12:00 noon

Credit Cards: All major

Attire: Smart casual

Reservations: Recommended

Parking: Onsite

Alcohol: License; world-class wine list

Price: Moderate/Expensive

Handicapped Accessible: Yes

Website: www.undicirestaurant.com

© 2010 NJ.com. All rights reserved.