

Treat Yourself To A Meal At Varanese

[Varanese; 2106 Frankfort Avenue, Louisville, KY 40206. (502) 899-9904. Online www.varanese.com.]

Chef John Varanese defines the cuisine of his namesake restaurant as “modern Mediterranean.” And Varanese, located on Frankfort Avenue in the Clifton neighborhood does not disappoint diners expecting a delicious meal by the acclaimed chef. The menu includes nightly specials in addition to its regular selection, both with an emphasis on local products. And the menu allows the patron to choose whether he or she is up for a casual meal or a fine dining experience. One could enjoy a sandwich or select appetizers with a cocktail or order a five course meal with a complementing bottle of wine.

Varanese is located in what was once the Red Lounge. The building dates back to the late 19th century and was at one point an auto repair shop. There is nothing to remind one of the restaurant’s past history with its décor now. The dining area reflects the restaurant’s modern approach to food. The lines are clean and uncluttered, tables are simply covered in white and the walls painted in calming tones.

The restaurant does accept reservations but our party of four was lucky enough to walk in on a Saturday night without a wait. But the restaurant was still bustling. Varanese has an extensive wine list and a

special Wine on Wednesdays or WOW which promotes ½ off bottles of wine. But I was with some serious drinkers so cocktails were de rigueur. As we perused the menu, several items stood out as sounding particularly delectable. It was nice to dining with more than one companion because that gave me a greater opportunity to sample everyone’s dishes.

After another round of cocktails, we started with appetizers and salads. One friend selected the Fried Green Tomato Salad (\$7), another opted for the Romaine Salad (\$6) and I shared the Crispy Fried Calamari (\$9) with another. The tomatoes on the one salad were topped with a buttermilk dressing and adorned with goat cheese and crispy prosciutto. The contrast of flavors was superb. The romaine on the other salad was tossed with roasted garlic and parmesan dressing and fried polenta croutons. And the calamari was served with a variety of peppers and a sweet chili sauce. The squid was cooked perfectly and the accompanying sauce enhanced its flavor.

We were all there for more than a sandwich although some of those choices sounded terrific. The emphasis with the sandwiches was definitely more Mediterranean with a Chicken with Feta Cheese wrapped in Flatbread with a Yogurt dipping sauce (\$9) and a Hummus and Roasted Vegetable Sandwich also served in Flatbread (\$9) among some of the selections.

Two of the nightly specials appealed to my companions who selected the Seafood Pasta and the Grouper. My other friend stuck to the regular menu and ordered the Flat Iron Steak (\$18) and I picked the Beef Tips with Tortellini (\$16).

The Seafood Pasta was full of tasty seafood and al dente pasta. The piece de resistance was the large shrimp perched atop the pasta. The Grouper was nicely cooked and served with a saffron rice and squash medley.

The Flat Iron Steak was grilled and drizzled with garlic Boursin cheese sauce and served with a potato gratin. My friend declared his steak one of the most tender he had ever eaten. I also enjoyed my beef tips cooked with cheese tortellini with creamy gorgonzola sauce, baby spinach, grape tomatoes and pine nuts and was embellished with strips of crispy prosciutto. I loved the pairing of the rich gorgonzola with the beef.

We passed on desserts since our meals were rich and we had eaten so much of ours as well as the others. There are, however, some tasty sounding sweets such as Fried Banana with Oatmeal Cookie Dough Ice Cream (\$6), Peaches and Crème Crepes (\$6) and a Chocolate Lava Cake served with Ice Cream (\$7).

It is easy to decide to eat out when you

by Beth Ann Rubin



are tired, have nothing in the pantry or just don’t want to cook. Sometimes it is not so easy to treat yourself to a special night out. You need to decide whether you are actually going out for a dining experience or simply as a meal substitute. Any basic spot can be visited for a meal substitute. But when you set aside the time for a true dining experience, I recommend Varanese for its comfortable atmosphere, good service and modern yet approachable and affordable cuisine.



Beth Ann Rubin has been reviewing restaurants for THE LETTER for nearly four years. A Chicago native, Beth Ann and her family live just south of Louisville’s Highlands neighborhood. A talented cook in her own right, over the years her baked goods have earned her numerous awards at the Kentucky State Fair.