

THE ITALIAN JOB

Allegro scores big with welcoming ambiance and rich pasta dishes

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

After watching passengers disembark off two buses with Oklahoma plates in front of One Midtown Kitchen on a recent Monday evening, my husband and I opted to avoid the crowd and walk across the street to try the new Allegro. It turned out to be a great move.

A smiling guy greeted us and escorted us to a table near a window. Folks were seated throughout the dining room, and a large group occupied a long table at the back. But immediate seating was available without a reservation. As he handed us menus, he told us that the restaurant had been open for a month.

The dining room's contemporary décor has a red-and-gold palette. A large, glass mosaic of a harlequin is the dominant work of art. Candles twinkle on tabletops. The sleek chairs have a dark wooden back attached to the cushioned seat with two C-curve metal bars for a look reminiscent of a partially opened three-ring binder. At first, the chair felt awkward because the back seemed excessively straight, but over the course of the evening, it proved quite comfortable.

Located on the ground level of the Belvedere condominium complex, Allegro offers upscale classical Central Italian cuisine, with a focus on the regions of Tuscany, Umbria and Marche. Executive Chef Jose Rego, who earned a culinary arts degree at Johnson & Wales University, has experience with Italian cuisine: He worked at Sotto Sotto and Fritti for three years in addition to Via Matta in Boston.

Traditional Italian meals can last for hours, and the menu here tempts guests to linger over multiple courses. As we debated menu options, many of which feature imported Italian products, two different servers greeted us. Throughout the evening, they continued the tag-team approach with skill, successfully balancing attentiveness with a respect for our privacy. A third server delivered flutes with a small pour of Prosecco (Italian sparkling wine) to the table, explaining that this Italian custom is meant to make us feel welcome. It worked.

Our antipasti arrived within minutes. Saporì Toscani features three cured meats, three Italian cheeses, a few olives and marinated gold and red beets. There was more than enough of the tasty assortment for two to share and still have remnants boxed to take home to enjoy another day.



Galletto grilled Ashland Farm chicken

PHOTOS/SPARK ST. JUDE

MAIN COURSE

The delicious salad consisted of mixed greens with roasted yellow and red beets, caramelized Granny Smith apples, a fried goat-cheese cake and blood-orange vinaigrette. This, too, was a shareable portion.

The helpings of the pasta course were so generous that it might do as a main entrée. Tagiatelle funghi e asparagi was my favorite dish of the evening: The long, wide noodles are tossed with wild mushrooms, asparagus and a light cream sauce. The dish was richer and more elegant than expected of the delicate flavors of its ingredient. The butternut squash nude ravioli was strangely bland and had a denser bite than expected. It was OK, but not up to the quality of the other dishes.

The Rombo Guazzetto entrée of grilled grouper was served in a broth of roasted peppers, capers, tomato, zucchini and wild oregano. The fish flaked in large mouth-filling chunks. The dish had a satisfying earthiness to it, but even better was the Galletto grilled Ashland Farm chicken. Tender white meat was topped with prosciutto and fontina cheese on a bed of ratatouille, polenta and spears of grilled asparagus.

While the white chocolate and pumpkin cheesecake was creamy, rich and satisfying, Zuppa Inglese proved to be an even sweeter treat. Made of thin layers of cake and cream wrapped in chocolate, its cool temperature and airy texture reminded me of one of my father's

favorite homemade desserts.

Between courses, friendly folks stopped by our table, and by the end of the evening, we felt fully integrated into the Allegro community. Alberto Fedeli, Allegro's owner and managing partner, is a native Italian who hopes his restaurant exceeds guests' expectations. Chef Rego suggested that the next time we dine at the restaurant we try the king crab cannelloni and the boneless braised beef short ribs—both items we'd considered but had lost to other options. If I've learned anything as a food writer, it's to always order what the chef suggests, and so I plan to return to taste these soon, since Rego routinely updates the menu.

The days of being able to snag a table upon arrival without advance reservations may be numbered. As word of Allegro spreads, it seems likely that guests will begin arriving by the busload. **SP**



Executive Chef Jose Rego



Owner Alberto Fedeli

DINING ESSENTIALS

Allegro
560 Dutch Valley Road
404-888-1890
www.allegroatlanta.com

Hours: Dinner nightly, 5:30–10:30 p.m.

Reservations: Recommended; also accepts walk-ins

Dress Code: Casual elegant

Cuisine: Upscale Italian

Alcohol: Full bar

Cost: Appetizers and salads, \$7–\$12; pastas and risottos, \$15–\$26; entrées, \$20 to \$32

Credit Cards: American Express, MasterCard, Visa

Outdoor Seating: Patio

Parking: Valet