Dining Out

Sampling some of the borough's best meals in West Chester's premier dinner destinations. This Month: Mercato

Full disclosure: when I think of dining out, I don't immediately think "Italian." This is not due to any sort of aversion to Italian food, trust me. But as a single mom with two kids and two jobs (plus), I've thrown together a lot of pasta and Carlino's meatballs—the latter are always in my freezer—and have ordered plenty of pizzas over the years. Often, we've had both in a given week. Granted, Carlino's is hardly Chef Boyardee, but you get my drift. So, when it's time to go out, I'm thinking about things that I don't make at home (or can't—I know my limitations). The only meat I usually keep in the house is chicken, so I tend to lean towards a nice cut of steak with a creative potato side and some fresh grilled veggies, or anything that takes more culinary talent, skill—and time! —than I can muster.

And yes—I'm very much aware that Italian food stretches well beyond the pasta + pizza range, and we need look no further than Mercato Ristorante & Bar on Market Street for proof of that. Factor in my son, who, whenever dining out in the borough is an option, will opt for Mercato. I don't even have to ask him, really. That's where we found ourselves on a sublime summer evening as June dwindled down. We absolutely opted to sit outside—Mercato has been doing the outdoor seating thing since before it was cool—and a COVID-inspired necessity. It was one of those evenings where the light was just right, and the air was warm but not hot. The place was busy although it was early—maybe 5:30—and the patrons ran the gamut from young professionals to full families to one solo diner (with dog). Dining al fresco is always a lovely departure from the norm—one feels a bit transported to Europe, at least temporarily. Fresh air, natural light, people watching...and dogs. You don't need me to tell you that West Chester is a very dog-centric town, and dining along the Market Street sidewalk gives you front-row seat to a veritable parade of dogs. I'll get back to this.



After we were seated, Macy hustled over to greet us. I'm a decades-long veteran of the service industry, and I appreciate a good server. We had one in Macy. Friendly and upbeat but not pushy or hovering, she was efficient and knew her stuff, fielding questions and listing the specials with assurance. Myles typically orders a soda when we're out, but in anticipation of a lot of food, stuck to water, while I ordered a Heineken 0.0. If you're curious about N/A beers, this is one of the better ones, so kudos to either GM Chris Jones or whoever else may have decided to stock this beverage.

Macy fetched us some bread, and it is superior; with a wedge of cheese, perhaps, I could make a meal of the bread alone. It's dense and chewy, with a crunchy, crusty...crust, and served alongside a rich, tangy tomato pesto for dipping, a nice change of pace from butter or even olive oil. We also barely let poor Macy drop the bread before we were talking over each other to order the Arancini appetizer to share.

Consisting of three large meatball-sized croquettes, these are stuffed with shredded short rib, risotto, and mozzarella sitting atop a shallow pool of thick pomodoro sauce. It's an automatic order for us here, and we dispatched it quickly. For my entrée, I felt a little

protein was in order, and went with the Chicken Caprese: a boneless breast, topped with sliced eggplant, paper-thin prosciutto, and melted mozzarella. It arrived topped with small, halved Roma tomatoes and a side of fresh veggies: crisp green beans, chunky julienned carrots, and perfectly cooked cauliflower (yes, I'm one of those weird cauliflower fans).

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Myles was in "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" mode, and stuck with the short rib thing (I told you I don't cook meat at home—it never tastes as good as when someone else cooks it!), and he opted for the Paccheri Napoletani. This rich dish is comprised of Mercato's outstanding short rib ragu alongside wide homemade rigatoni. Pasta from scratch has a flavor all its own, doesn't it? Something else I've never attempted in my own kitchen...maybe someday.

Completely stuffed to the gills, we at first discussed passing on dessert. But Myles cannot resist crème brûlée—and no, I've never attempted that at home, either! -so he ordered Mercato's homemade vanilla offering, which comes with Amerena cherry and a dusting of powdered sugar. From the perfect crunchy top to the bottom of the dish, it was exquisite (okay, I had a tiny taste, for research purposes). We made a pact right there to take a very long post-dinner walk around town.

Speaking of walks—back to the dogs! If you know me you know I've never met a dog I didn't like—every shape, size, age, and breed (with a particular soft spot for mutts). Whether they were trotting by on leashes for their evening constitutional, or lying at their owners' feet at a table, the dog-watching rivals the people-watching at Mercato. The sidewalk acts like a catwalk (wait, what?) as a canine rainbow gallops, lopes, prances, or meanders by, on full alert, what with all the food smells. And yes—I leaned out to pet every single one that I could reach. I'm that person. And great news: since our visit, at some point in mid-July, Mercato added a "puppy bites" menu, with "puptails," "yappy meals," and "treats" categories. So, it's now officially a BYO pupper spot.

Top-notch Italian food in a relaxed European atmosphere with excellent service, unrivaled people watching + dogs. What else do you need, really?

Mercato is open at 33 West Market Street for lunch and dinner seven days a week, brunch on Saturday and Sunday, takeout, and hosts private events. For menus and more information, visit mercatowc.com.

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