

A FAMILY AFFAIR AT SORRENTINA

Zeddy Lawrence discovers a home from home in the heart of Harrow, where the staff have been serving up a warm welcome for three decades



When the virtuoso violinist Niccolò Paganini was met by a chorus of 'encore, encore' after one of his legendary concerts, he's reputed to have silenced the audience with the brusque rebuke 'Paganini does not repeat'.

In short, you can't reproduce that special something that makes a great performance unique. True of music, true of art and, according to Pasquale Catino of Trattoria Sorrentina, true of restaurants as well. "We're like Paganini," he muses, explaining why he and his business partner Tony Reitano have never sought to replicate the incredible success of the award-winning Italian eatery – a fixture on the Harrow landscape for more than three decades. "You can't put your personality in two places, that's why we don't branch out. Like Paganini, we never repeat."

Personality is the key word. Never mind the excellent food – testament to fresh ingredients, experienced chefs and authentic techniques – what Trattoria Sorrentina serves up in abundance is an atmosphere where diners aren't just customers, they're part

of the family. Which is why, for 30 years, generation after generation of hungry Harrow residents keep coming back to a place they consider a second home.

"By your second visit," says Pasquale, "you already feel you belong here. Even if it's years later, there'll be the same warmth, the same welcome, the same cosy family."

In actual fact, as I discovered, you don't need to wait until your second visit to feel right at home. So relaxed is the ambience and so amiable are the staff that even

'COME HERE YEARS LATER & THERE'LL STILL BE THE SAME WARM, COSY FAMILY'

before the main course, or secondi piatti, was served on my first trip, I was sharing jokes with the waiter and chatting with Pasquale and business partner and head chef Miguel as if I'd known them my whole life. Heck, by the end of the meal, I was even asking if I could take Miguel home with me, so delicious was the food he prepared. Apparently, and not surprisingly, it's a request he's heard quite often during the 15 years he's been king of the kitchen at Sorrentina. And again not surprisingly, he declined my offer: "I love to come into the

restaurant," he says, "to see the customers' faces when they're eating."

"Passion," he tells me is what makes his food taste so good. "Passion and fresh, prime ingredients."

And so to the dishes themselves. The menu's bursting with choice, with something to suit every palate, from spaghetti to steak, from risotto to ravioli and from funghi to fish. It's also worth noting that there's a wide variety of vegetarian dishes on offer. After a thoroughly tasty, bruschetta, on Pasquale's

recommendation I opted for the *sogliola alla griglia*, grilled dover sole served with tartar sauce – apparently a firm favourite with the restaurant's Jewish clientele. Delicately flavoured and cooked to perfection, I could see why.

My dining partner opted for the *salmona di scozia all'agro caldo* – Scotch salmon grilled with olive oil, lemon capers, olives and tomatoes. Only one word was needed to describe it: "Divine."

Time for dessert. And torn between the healthy mango option and the chocolate fudge cake,

Miguel offered us both. A truly delicious combination and evidence of the restaurant's willingness to adapt dishes to diners' individual requirements. As Pasquale says, they adapt the menu every 12 to 18 months. But if a customer can no longer find his favourite dish, they'll rustle it up for him.

Having experienced the restaurant first-hand, it's easy to understand why it has such a special place in the hearts of its loyal customers. Diners aren't just part of the Sorrentina family, Sorrentina is part of their families, sharing in their joy as it serves up celebratory meals year after year on special occasions.

Little wonder, also, that a dozen marriage proposals have taken place here. For Sorrentina isn't just like Paganini in that it refuses to repeat. Ultimately, what the great Italian musician was to the violin, Sorrentina is to Italian restaurants – a virtuoso. And I for one will certainly be going back for an encore.

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