

## This Week's Dinner Review

### Azure Cafe has a wonderful and winning way with Italian

By C. Z. Cramer

We made a discovery we might have missed were it not for a tip from a fellow fan of food and jazz: Freeport's Azure Cafe. Open nearly a year, the Azure favors the culinary methods of southern Italy with some original twists. The bonus is live jazz several nights per week.

It is a pretty restaurant, with white grotto-style columns in the dining room and an attractive wine cabinet in front of the kitchen, above which hang cone-shaped light fixtures of blue glass. The interior paint job is clean and colorful. Paintings and other work by local artists hang on the walls. Small white votives flicker on bare tables of dark, varnished wood.

A good and approachable wine list favors Italy and California along with a few Aussies. Most of the two dozen choices are under \$30 per bottle. Another half-dozen wines on special appeared on a separately printed sheet. Beers include the Italian Moretti and seasonal selections from Freeport Brewing Company. We picked a bottle of Italian red - Monte Antico sangiovese - which was bright with plum and pepper accents, but smooth enough for seafood.

Calamari "azzimata" - dressed up - made a very auspicious beginning (\$8). Tender rings and tentacles in a light, salty crust were heaped in one of the wide, shallow white bowls in which Azure serves many of its creations. Plenty to share, the calamari was dressed with a sprinkle of piquant vinaigrette.

Other antipasti included bruschetta with wild mushrooms and gruyere (\$7), crab cakes with roasted red pepper aioli (\$9), mussels steamed in wine and garlic (\$9) and warm artichoke dip with crostini

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### HOW IT RATES

Azure Cafe  
123 Main St. Freeport  
865-1237

**Food:** ★★★★★

**Atmosphere:** ★★★★★

**Service:** ★★★★★

**Hours:** 11 a.m.-3 p.m. and 5-8 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Friday-Saturday, 11 a.m.-8 p.m. Sunday

**Credit cards:** MC, Visa

**Vegetarian dishes:**

Yes

**Price range:** Salads, sandwiches, pizza, and pasta \$3.50 - \$9.50

**Reservations:**

Recommended on weekends

**Bar:** Full

**Wheelchair access:**

Accessible

**Bottom line:** A

generous Italian spirit seems to inhabit this friendly café, and we found magic in a spicy fish stew. Live music, good service, and good food add up to a very good value.

ALSO IN  
**Entertainment**

### DINING

#### **Dinner this week:**

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(\$7). There were also soups including cream of roasted tomato and clam chowder (cup \$4).

The house bread was a simple and tender baguette. It was served with a soufflé cup of fruity olive oil that had been doctored with a dab of roasted garlic paste, which transformed the plain Jane bread into a highly compelling snack.

Small salads were included with the entrées, a nice toss of young lettuces with halved grape tomatoes and tart, vinegary dressing. The side salad may be upgraded to a small Caesar for an additional \$3, which was a nice deal since the latter was substantial and tasty. The homemade croutons were quite delicate, the freshly grated cheese was strong, and the garnishing white anchovy was choice.

The list of entrées was full of familiar Italian favorites including fettuccine alfredo (\$12), which may be upgraded with chicken (\$15) or lobster (\$22), and chicken or veal marsala (\$15 and \$17, respectively). There were two lasagnas, meatless with four cheeses (\$12) and a bolognese version that included veal, sausage and beef (\$14), which we spotted at the next table. It was a many-layered splendor.

Linguine was offered with clam sauce (\$15) or with roasted garlic marinara sauce (\$11) and optional meatballs or Italian sausage (\$2.50). There was veal saltimbocca, the classic sauté of scallopini with prosciutto, mozzarella and sage (\$18).

Not that it was all about pasta. There was a roast half chicken with polenta and pancetta stuffing and sage pan gravy (\$17), grilled beef tenderloin (\$26), cedar-plank roasted salmon (\$17) and roast pork tenderloin with potato pancakes (\$18).

Roasted vegetable napoleon was a novelty and a delicious light entrée (\$16). Meticulously cut and sautéed rounds of eggplant, squash and tomato were adorned with roasted garlic paste and grated cheeses and stacked onto a

pair of pan-fried polenta rounds. The vertical construction of vegetable slices formed a handsome tower that was kept upright by a jaunty branch of fresh rosemary used as a skewer, with its tip at a summit a good 6 inches above the plate. A piquant reduction of basil oil and balsamic vinegar was squirted across the napoleon and around its perimeter; its flavor was in bright contrast to the cheesy veggies and we longed for a little more of it.

I'm one of those people whose suspicion meter starts beeping when the words "our house specialty" are printed on the menu next to a pricey dish. Worse, I have a thing about avoiding tomato-based fish stews from restaurants I don't know well enough to trust, having endured my share of tart, bitter stews of overcooked seafood made tough by acid canned tomatoes. Fortunately for me, I put aside my hang-ups and ordered the Azure Cafe's San Francisco-style cioppino.

This was a spectacular fish stew (\$26). Sweet, fresh scallops, mussels, shrimp, haddock, and a dramatic half lobster - each one perfectly and delicately cooked to its own requirements - were swathed in a mellow, concentrated, thick, herby, magical red broth. Beneath the seafood, we found the hidden treat of perfectly cooked linguine. Here was a stew to recommend and to return for.

The dishes we tasted captured what is wonderful about Italian food when it's freshly made to order. The food looks great, too - this kitchen knows a thing or two about presentation. And the meal was enhanced by the music being supplied by pianist Matt Fogg. His was a low-key concert that did not impede conversation.

From among several homemade desserts, our berry tart with hazelnut crust wasn't playing in the same league as the entrées (\$3.75). The strawberries were made invisible by the blueberries' color and neither berry had much flavor. The crust mostly consisted of crushed hazelnuts, which tasted toasted and oily; more pastry would have lightened things up. We got over the disappointing tart

with a hot cup of espresso, expertly prepared with a dainty, creamy head (\$1.75).

Azure Cafe serves lunch and dinner every day except Monday. This Main Street cafe seems to have found a niche among visiting shoppers during the daytime, and loyal locals at night. Easy to see why, with the combination of well-prepared Italian food, reasonable prices and live music. Service is equally admirable; our waitress was a charmer and she knew her menu well.

Dinner was \$86.14.

*Audience welcomes letters from Taste & Tell readers. Letters should be fewer than 200 words and include full name, address and a telephone number. All letters may be edited. Address letters to Linda Fullerton, managing editor, features, Maine Sunday Telegram, P.O. Box 1460, Portland 04104; email: [features@pressherald.com](mailto:features@pressherald.com)*