



Executive Dining

Sandro Fioriti cuts prosciutto at his restaurant; below, his fried artichoke platter

A Tale of Two Pastas

NEW YORK

The food at Sandro's, a loud trattoria led by its unpredictable chef, can make you weep with joy.

By Alan Richman

◆ Sandro is back. And not for the first time. Tracking Sandro Fioriti—chef, icon, deity, eccentric—requires the instincts of a Kremlinologist. In New York alone, he's worked at a minimum of 12 restaurants, his spokeswoman says. Now, there's a new Sandro's, a 50-seat restaurant on Manhattan's Upper East Side.

At his apogee, Sandro cooked Italian



food as well as anybody ever has in the U.S., combining simplicity, authenticity and boldness. When I ate at the first Sandro's in the late 1980s with food writers Victor and Marcella Hazan, they called him their favorite Italian chef in America.

The new restaurant is cramped, bright and loud, much like a Roman trattoria. Sandro fits right in, except he's huge: 6 feet 4 inches (1.93 meters) tall, not thin, not kempt, not calm. Your meal will move at his pace: irregularly. I ordered his famous fried artichokes, and, an hour later, out came one whole fried artichoke, cold and oily—for \$15. Bad Sandro.

Good Sandro crafts pastas that will make you understand why Italians weep with pleasure over their food. Spaghetti with lemon is an act of daring—the sauce balanced exquisitely between tart and sweet. Sandro's tomato sauce invites contemplation: How can anything this chunky be so subtle and refined?

Balsamic vinegar elevates chicken livers to the poultry pantheon. A \$12 appetizer was large enough to feed

three; portions at Sandro's tend to be extremely generous.

Of the main courses, *branzino* (sea bass) arrosto with potatoes should not be missed. *Arrosto* means *roasted*. The menu translates it as *broiled*. Who knows? The dish, prepared with white wine and lemon, was as sweet and savory as fish can get. Grilled beef with olive oil, garlic and lemon was generous and juicy.

Veal missed every time. Two scaloppine dishes (one with lemon, the other a special with eggplant and mozzarella) were overcooked. Same for a veal chop that arrived unbidden instead of the medium-rare lamb chops we ordered. The pan-seared cuttlefish with crispy artichokes wasn't cuttlefish, although it was superb. It was actually calamari.

I asked the waiter to enlighten me. "Sandro decided to do it his way," he said and pointed to his head. "You know Sandro." ◆

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