

Pronto Joey's offers lavish fare, easy prices

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Two heads are said to be better than one, and a doubleheader always draws a crowd. Just north of Carrier Circle, Joey De Cuffa proves it with his two popular Italian restaurants under the same roof.

Joey's Classic Italian dining downstairs began in 1982, and Pronto Joey's casual Italian dining upstairs made it a twosome in 1992. Now De Cuffa and his staffs are celebrating 25 years of "great food and warm hospitality," and dinner on a recent Saturday evening at the bistrolike "Pronto" put us in its cheering section.

Food we sampled was remarkably good and generous, and service was outstanding. Everything tasted fresh and carefully prepared. A comment from the booth behind ours said it all: "I'll be back again next Saturday," a man told the waitress as he was leaving, "and I want this booth."

The narrow dining room with three rows of booths, tables and a long banquette is a carnival of colors with geometric shapes and giant posters on the walls.

Pronto Joey's moderately priced menu is diner-friendly, with eight appetizers (\$4.99 to \$7.99), homemade soups, salads and personal pizzas (\$4.99 to \$5.99), eight sandwiches with fries (\$5.99 to \$8.99) and homemade pasta (\$7.99 and \$8.99) with a choice of sauces.

Eleven Italian specialties, each with a dinner salad, start with baked rigatoni (\$9.99) and stretch to an Italian platter (\$12.99). Served with salad and a side of spaghetti are eight chicken, veal and pork dinners (\$10.99 to \$12.99) and 13 steak and seafood items (\$10.99 to \$13.99).

Children younger than 10 have six choices (\$3.99 and \$4.99), and, judging from the smiles on a row of five tiny diners lined up on the banquette after a mall visit to Santa, spaghetti was a big hit.

We started with generous glasses of house Merlot (\$4.95 each) and a basket of crusty warm Italian bread with soft garlic butter.

Homemade soups were welcome on a frigid night, and a delicious cup of hot minestrone (\$1.99) was loaded with a variety of tender vegetables.

Greens and beans (\$4.99), offered only in a bowl (an unexpectedly large one that could have served two or three), arrived still steaming and was easily the best version I've tasted of this traditional Italian medley, cleverly laced here with bits of bacon for extra texture and flavor.

Salads of fresh mixed greens with good house-made balsamic vinaigrette were garnished with sliced olives, tomatoes and baby carrots.

If Pronto Joey's chef is going for a blue ribbon in hot and generous entrees, he got my vote for the bountiful homemade baked lasagna (\$11.99) with perfectly cooked layers of pasta, seasoned beef and pork and ricotta. Topped with thick and zesty tomato sauce and cheese, the dish is worth a detour.

Another entree that could easily satisfy two hearty eaters, fettuccine Alfredo (\$11.99 plus \$4 for adding shrimp) was a rich treat of homemade noodles laced with buttery cream and Asiago cheese sauce. Savvy diners can pay an extra \$2 to share this and all other entrees.

Other entree choices include stuffed shells (\$9.99), homemade ravioli and cannelloni (\$10.99), chicken or veal cacciatore (\$11.99), chicken Francaise or Parmigiana (\$12.99), baked fresh haddock or fish fry (\$10.99), beef braciola (\$10.99), London broil Italian style (\$11.99) and Joey's 14-ounce sizzling steak (\$13.99).

Made by the restaurant's pastry chef, pies, cheesecakes, cannoli and more are on the dessert list, and we took our waitress' suggestion for tiramisu (\$4.95), which we shared and she offered on separate plates with rosettes of whipped cream. The light layered cake, creamy filling and chocolate sauce made this a memorable finale.

Friendly, careful service never stopped from a waitress who never missed a chance to anticipate replacing silver, removing used dishes, encouraging boxes for leftovers and much more.

Pronto Joey's takes reservations for parties of five or more and has started full-service catering from a special menu or items from either "Joey's."

Yolanda Wright's weekly Dining Out review is based on an unannounced, anonymous visit. Recent reviews are available at www.syracuse.com/dining.