

Dining and Wining ... Where To Go ... Where Not To Go

THE BEST RESTAURANTS OF HONGKONG ... AND THE WORST !

Name of Restaurant

Isola Bar + Grill

Address of Restaurant

Levels 3 and 4, IFC Mall 2, Central, Hongkong

Date of Visit

Friday, June 6, 2008

CategoryTARGETs RatingService

| | | | |
|--|-----------|------------|------|
| First Impression | Excellent | Acceptable | Poor |
| Attentiveness to Customers' Needs | Excellent | Acceptable | Poor |
| Flexibility | Excellent | Acceptable | Poor |
| Product Expertise of Serving Staff | Excellent | Acceptable | Poor |
| Speed of Service | Excellent | Acceptable | Poor |
| Cleanliness of Uniform and Serving Staff | Excellent | Acceptable | Poor |

Ambiance

| | | | |
|----------|-----------|------------|------|
| Lighting | Excellent | Acceptable | Poor |
| Music | Excellent | Acceptable | Poor |
| General | Excellent | Acceptable | Poor |

Food

| | | | |
|--------------|-----------|------------|------|
| Presentation | Excellent | Acceptable | Poor |
| Taste | Excellent | Acceptable | Poor |

| | | | |
|--|------------|--------------|----------------|
| Quantity | Excellent | Acceptable | Poor |
| <u>Wine</u> (Weighted Toward Italian Wines) | | | |
| Choice | Extensive | Limited | Unbalanced |
| Cost | Reasonable | Unreasonable | Very Expensive |
| Storage of Wine | Good | Poor | Unknown |
| Expertise of Sommelier - None | Excellent | Acceptable | Poor |

Total Cost of Meal

Very Expensive Moderately Expensive Very Reasonably Priced

Name of Food and Beverage Manager

None

Name of Chef

Mr Gianni Caprioli

Comments

As William Shakespeare wrote in 1601 in his famous play, Hamlet: *‘There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.’*

And so it was for this restaurant reviewer on a trip to Isola Bar + Grill, located at IFC Mall 2, Hongkong Island, last Friday, June 6, 2008, that the learning process continued apace.

Isola Bar + Grill is, in fact, an Italian-styled, free-standing eatery which **TARGET** () would describe, politely, as being a pretentious, up-market, fast-food joint, minus the usual salad bar, found in US, fast-food restaurants, such as Denny’s, also known as Denny’s Diner.

Management of Isola Bar + Grill, obviously, is doing something correctly because this place, which seats about 240 people, was packed on the day that the **TARGET** team visited it.

Most of the people, frequenting this restaurant, last Friday, were the younger set, the young ladies, dressed in fashionable (or sexy) clothes, while the young men were dressed in the appropriate attire in order to achieve their goals.

It was obvious that most of the guests were not very interested in the food, being thrown together and dished up, since their main attentions were on *‘other’* things: Exchanges of the latest gossip; new fall designs at boutiques; problems with the boyfriend/girlfriend; and/or the planning of the next holiday.

Because nearly all of the many varieties of wines and alcoholic beverages on the wine list were Italian and because the cooks and what-have-you, working in the open-kitchen concept of the restaurant, were preparing mostly pasta dishes, it seemed to this medium that the logical thing with which to start off proceedings was a pizza.

And so Krishna, **TARGET**’s Nepalese waiter for part of the evening, was instructed that this medium’s first course would be a Margherita Pizza, which is among the most basic of pizzas, comprising tomato sauce, basil, and Mozzarella Cheese.

It costs \$HK138 and, for 3 people, it seemed like a good choice as a type of appetiser – just to test the waters, so to speak.

It seemed only natural and proper, too, that, with a pizza, a bottle of Italian wine, the principal grape variety, being Sangiovese, should be ordered due in large part to the fruity and flowery flavours of this grape.

Sangiovese Collio Pasaresi, Vintage 2005, was on the wine list at \$HK480 per bottle and, since this wine comes from an area of Italy, known as Marche, which is well known, it seemed a good choice for the evening.

This wine was a bit expensive, especially for such a young wine, but ... What the Hell!

Onella, a Filipina waitress, then emerged from the shadows and, after **TARGET** learned that the pizza would take about 15 minutes to be cooked – which was quite acceptable because, after all, this restaurant had the reputation of being a classy joint and so one assumes that pizzas are made freshly when requested by guests – a bottle of the Sangiovese was ordered.

About 2 minutes later, the wine emerged – but it was Vintage 2006, not Vintage 2005!

‘We are all out of 2005 wine,’ Onella replied when challenged by **TARGET** that the wine’s vintage was incorrect. *‘This is the*

same price, though!'

Not exactly fair, was it, but ... What the Hell!

Before the wine could be opened, however, a Margherita Pizza was placed on the table.

It had taken less than 5 minutes for the pizza to be '*cooked*'?

Hmmmmmm.

It was noted that the serving person was carrying the pizza on a rather thick, porcelain plate, without wearing any gloves or having any underlay to protect his hands.

Also, he did not appear to have any consideration as to the heat that one would have imagined would/should have permeated to the dish from the pizza, due to the cooking process.

On tasting the first slice of the pizza, this medium noted the following:

1. The pizza was tasteless;
2. The pizza was lukewarm;
3. The pizza had been dried up, somewhat; and,
4. The pizza, clearly, had been cooked and, then, kept at a constant temperature in a warmer of some sort.

Hence, the server had no fear of being burnt when carrying the cool pizza.

Pizza chefs in Italy are among the most-respected chefs in this wonderful country, commanding among the highest salaries, but the pizza, dished up in Isola Bar + Grill, is an insult to any self-respecting chef – from any country.

TARGET complained and, about 5 minutes later, Mr H.S. Bisht, Assistant Restaurant Manager, came over to explain that the pizza, served at Isola Bar + Grill, is the thin-shelled variety and, as such, it cannot be cooked too long '*otherwise it would be burned.*'

The conversation continued as followed:

TARGET: *And, for this reason, you serve only cold, or lukewarm, pizza? Is that correct?*

Mr H.S. Bisht: We don't consider our pizza cold. This is the temperature that we serve the pizza. Do you want another pizza?

TARGET: *That means that it is, after all, half cold. Is that correct, then?*

Mr H.S. Bisht: That is the temperature that we serve our pizza. We have never had a complaint before. Now, do you want another one?

TARGET: *Well, now you have at least one complaint.*

Mr H.S. Bisht retreated, obviously a little upset, but still maintaining a professional poise.

And, then, it was the turn of Mr Carlo Speranza, the Manager of Isola Bar + Grill, to take up the verbal challenge, left at the feet of Mr H. S. Bisht.

Now, Mr Carlo Speranza is an Italian, of that there could be no question, unlike Mr H. S. Bisht, who appeared to be an ethnic Indian.

Mr Carlo Speranza acted, very much, in the way that this reviewer had noted quite a number of Italians, acting in one section of Naples, Italy, which was visited by **TARGET** in 2005.

He is bash, confident, cocky, full of his own-perceived, self-importance, and, bordering on being rude in his aggressiveness.

This reviewer, who is a little frail in his old age, would not like to meet Mr Carlo Speranza in a dark alley when he was really angry and determined to extract revenge on somebody for being slighted.

Mr Carlo Speranza explained that that which Mr H.S. Bisht had stated was correct except that the pizza, served at Isola Bar + Grill, was never cold when it hit the table.

TARGET held up a bread-and-butter plate and enquired of Mr Carlo Speranza whether or not the temperature of the plate would be considered cold to the touch.

Then, a charger was held up: *'Would this be considered cold?'* **TARGET** asked.

To both questions, the answer from Mr Carlo Speranza was that the temperature of both plates would be considered cold ...
'But our pizza is not this temperature!' he quickly asserted.

'But it was!' **TARGET** stated emphatically.

When taken to task and told that Mr H. S. Bisht had explained that pizza, cooked at Isola Bar + Grill, cannot be cooked to a hot temperature *'because, otherwise it would be burned,'* Mr Carlo Speranza, then, accused this reviewer of telling lies, stating: *'He (Mr H. S. Bisht) did not say that!'*

After being assured that the quotation of Mr H. S. Bisht was, in fact, accurate, Mr Carlo Speranza retreated, saying something along the lines that you either take it (the pizza, dished up at Isola Bar + Grill) or leave it.

TARGET determined to leave the lukewarm pizza for somebody else to eat and ordered the following dishes in order to learn whether or not the pizza incident was a one-off mistake:

Minestrone Classico
Classic Minestrone Soup
\$HK88

Polletta al limone con spinacie patate
Roasted Free Range Spring Chicken with Spinach and Roasted Potatoes
\$HK208

Zuppa di pesce in brodo di pomodoro
Mixed Seafood Stew
(garoupa, king pawns, shrimps, baby calamari, scallops and clams),
broiled in a tomato, fish spicy broth
\$HK298

Bra ciola di maiale alla griglia
Con marmellata di cipolle, mele, patate e cicoria
Grilled Chestnut feed Korobuta Pork Loin
with Apple Onion Jam, Potato and Sautéed Chicory
\$HK268

The soup and the chicken dish were both excellent and it would be difficult to criticise either one of them.

The Minestrone Soup, of course, is a cinch to create because one only has to cut up the vegetables (or buy them, already cut up, from the wholesaler) and, then, boil, boil, and boil and boil some more.

The chicken dish, however, was wonderful, the chicken meat, being flavourful; and, it appeared that it had not been of the frozen variety.

As for the Mixed Seafood Stew, it, too, should have been as easy to create as the Minestrone Soup, but, when one is using second-grade ingredients, one may only expect a second-grade – or worse – dish.

The lone, very large prawn, for instance, almost had to be sawn into thirds in order for a piece to be placed in one's mouth and, then, ingested.

Aside from the fact that the decapod's meat was as tough as leather, the rest of the ingredients was without any merit, at all.

It was strange, however, that there was, in the stew, a raw clove of garlic, still in its tough, inedible casing!

Turning to the Korobuta Pork Loin, it was interesting that, of the 2 slices of pork steak, one was very dry and one was reasonably moist.

Neither piece had much flavour since both had been badly overcooked, but what had gone wrong with this dish was that one piece of pork steak had been cooked, at one time, and the other piece, cooked some time later.

Hence, one piece of meat was somewhat juicy; the other was almost bone-dry.

TARGET did not make another complaint to anybody ... What the Hell!

The Funny Side Of Life

Because **TARGET**'s lone guest complained of being hungry, this medium, then, ordered the following dishes:

Martelli al pesto, di tartufo estivo, bottarga e asparagi
Martelli Spaghetti with Summer Black Truffle, Dried Fish Roe, Pesto and Fresh Asparagus
\$HK238

Gnocchi di patate con gorgonzola, pomodoro crudo e rucola
Soft Potato Gnocchi with Gorgonzola Cheese, Fresh Tomato Sauce and Arugula Leaves
\$HK148

The above 2 dishes were ordered at intervals of about 5 minutes because, after ordering the first course, the Martelli Spaghetti, **TARGET**'s Chinese waiter – the third change of the evening – returned with a statement that the kitchen had instructed him to state that the dish could not be hot, or, perhaps, even lukewarm, because the dish is made in 3 stages:

Stage One: Cook the pasta;
Stage Two: Cook the sauce; and, then,
Stage Three: Drizzle the truffle juice over the entire concoction.

The result would be a lukewarm dish, at best, and on the cold side, at worst.

It was strongly suggested, probably by Mr Carlo Speranza, although it was not stated that it was he who made the suggestion, that another dish, as a replacement, should be ordered.

Hence, the gnocchi was ordered.

TARGET is happy to report that there was no complaint about the Soft Potato Gnocchi with Gorgonzola Cheese and it was devoured in full.

It was, also, very hot – as it should be – and, clearly, it was fresh, as fresh as a potato dumpling could be.

TARGET did, also, order a selection of desserts at \$HK218, but enough criticism for one day: Enough is enough ... What the Hell!

Conclusion: Nobody in management appears to care very much what the guests of Isola Bar + Grill think of the food, being dished up, because the money is just rolling in – at least, for the time being.

This is a fast-food joint, to be sure, charging some of the highest prices in Hongkong for some of the most-basic dishes, prepared by people who are not worthy of wearing a chef's hat.

There is another fast-food joint in Hongkong, specialising in making pizza, and its pizza, which has never been ordered by this reviewer, during the past decade, is, still, superior to the cold/lukewarm muck, being served at Isola Bar + Grill.

The atmosphere at this restaurant is not conducive to romance, to fine dining, or anything else because, among other things, the décor is such that one cannot hold a conversation on any interesting subject, of importance, of pith or of moment.

As for the food, in general, it is reminiscent of cultural, culinary mediocrity.

Which, no doubt, is in keeping with many, if not most, of the other food outlets at IFC Mall.

For the money that one has to pay for this food, there are many other, much better places in the Hongkong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to eat than Isola Bar + Grill.

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