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Mr. martino s philadelphia

See website Bentwood relying on Mr. Martino's wobble and squeak with varying degrees of age and comfort. And though the staff are graciously patient with those who fuss and switch until they find the perfect seat, don't expect an interior design makeover anytime soon at this South Philly classic. Simple pleasures at Mr. Martino's in South Philadelphia We couldn't get ourselves to buy new chairs, owner Marc Farnese said, when he swapped my chair for someone who still had a back. It just wouldn't feel right. After 18-plus years inside this dimly lit oasis of homely Italian cooking, a former 19th-century hardware store whose chestnut-paneled room is hung with antique paintings, lacy curtains and old family photos, a few quirks can be expected. But few Philadelphia restaurants revel in the reclusive embrace of their eccentricities quite like Mr. Martino's, cash-only, weekend-only trattoria that's so subdued, its owners would rather be overlooked altogether. I don't think it's going to work, wrote chef and co-owner Maria Farnese in an email after learning of a planned review. I don't want to waste your time. After a few meals built on polenta and sausages, simple but satisfying soups, and one of the city's most characteristic moody rooms, there was little chance of that. The restaurant itself could easily be missed in the middle of the bustle that now energizes trendy East Passyunk Avenue. While Cantina Los Caballitos explodes across the street with margarita-driven hipster crowds - windows swung wide open and every inch of the sidewalk planted with a table - there's little more than a quiet storefront and a dangling hand-painted sign on a four-legged table marking Mr. Martino's turf. Farneses, who have been here long enough to remember when the children played halfball in the now jammed parking lot next to their building, like it that way. Pull the brass-handled door and step into the oddly angled room where classical jazz flows through the air and Marc is posed behind the bar refashioned from the hardware store's antique nail bin. The modern pace of South Philly fades as a memory. We only have 50 seats and a six-burner stove with Maria alone in the kitchen, says Marc. A lot of people have missed their movies coming to Mr. Martino's. Maria's reluctance to be held up to foodie control, though, speaks volumes to the essence - and limitations - of this BYO, one of the last remnants of the homespun spirit of our first Restaurant Renaissance. Inspired by their frequent visits to Italy and launched as a career-changer (Marc sold antiques, she commuted to New York as a fabric designer), Maria's menu has grown ever so slowly as she taught herself to cook through books and the loneliness of her kitchen routines. I'm a chef, not a chef, she says bluntly. And I cook like a housewife. I do everything in of the day, and reheat it Service. No doubt that home-style cooking from this kitchen is so simplistic, it's not for everyone - especially those steeped in the sophistication of today's scene. Even a decade ago, during my first Martino visit, I remember thinking that this food was a little too common. But recently, when you sit on a stable chair under an antique lamp of a boy blowing a light bulb to a bubble, something clicked. The simple clarity of Maria's best dishes rang like a soulful ping on my taste buds. Pasta and bean soup was an ode to pure peasant textures, the soft white beans against chewing pasta rings, and a bean broth lit up with piney herbaceous panfried rosemary. House-baked wedges of ricotta cheese are one of the standby starters, a cold appetizer that disappears no matter which garnish comes on top - string beans and juicy grape tomatoes thrown in the herby vinaigrette, or chewy rounds of Claudio's soppressatta and oil-cured olives. Without much flourish to her compositions, Maria is quick to tout the pedigree of her local vendors, with fresh stuffed pastas from Nino's and Talluto's, great Italian sausage from Fiorella's and Cannuli's (on Ritner), Michael Anastasio produce, and chuck from Harry Ochs, who simmer into tomato gravy. That meat-infused ragu (beef is removed for a special with kidney beans) is key to my favorite dish, smothering wedges of polenta and roasted sausage with slow-cooked richness. But these building blocks make their case in more harsh dishes, too, like cheese ravioli from Nino's, which are shone with a sheen of nutmeg-stained butter under slivered asparagus. Even bread served with sun-dried tomato oil is a matter of considerable discussion, with Mr. Martino faithfully split between those visiting for crusty Faragalli nights (Friday and Saturday) or puffier Varallo's (Sunday). Maria's pre-cooking method works well enough for most of the menu, especially indestructible ones like balsamic-fried chicken, or pasta fagiole main courses rigatoni and hearty white beans with spicy broccoli rabe. Grandmaly desserts like deliberately undersweetened tiramisu (with homemade ladyfingers), or tart lemon curd pastry, or spongy genoise with strawberry and cream anglaise, or decadent retro chocolate pudding, survived and satisfied without any problems. In dishes that require little to order finesse, however, Mr. Martino's can use work. Entrees with reheated boneless chicken breast were dry. Pens with fried zucchini were filled with skewers of limp squash. Broccoli rabe - as effective as a bitter counterpoint to pasta - was itself a bowl of bitter, unravelling, off-green porridge. Most problematic, however, was a risotto special that was flavorful but full of rubbery bay scallop nubs. There is an easy way, of course, to extract molluscs' full taste for rice without the final dish (a simple stock - with fresh scallops added at the last minute - would do). But it may require a change in routine. We're just a crazy little restaurant and we can't change. This is who we are, Marc said without a hint of defensiveness, unbelievable after I had sent my dish back. Can I get you something else? You bet - another plate of sausage and polenta, please. When you get to know (and embrace) Mr. Martino's many quirks, it's easy to see why it really doesn't have to change. Next Sunday, Craig LaBan reviews Hoof + Fin in Queen Village. Contact him at 215-654-2682 or claban@phillynews.com. The food was very good but a limited starter and main course selection kept this place back. I know it's just Nonna in the kitchen alone, and my scallop and risotto were great, but there were no non-pasta dishes to talk about. If you like well... priced pasta on a funky BYOB and you are in the neighborhood, go, otherwise better BYOB in town. More city. More