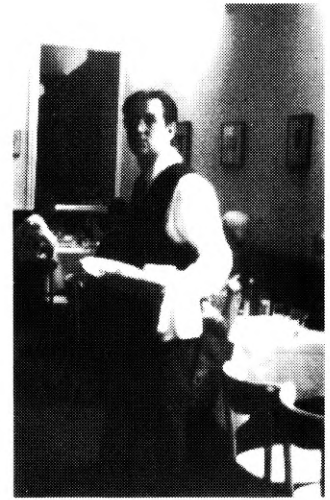


Restaurant Review

Ristorante Roberto

A Ristorante for all tastes

Marie-Claire Putrino



As all young lawyers know, the single most important thing about your admission day is the huge and usually very long lunch after the ceremony!

After much initial indecision, the consensus amongst those brave enough to partake in the after-admission festivities was Ristorante Roberto (or simply, Roberto's, for those more familiar) on the corner of Russell St and Flinders Lane.

And what an excellent choice! Established four years ago, Roberto's won the Age Good Food Guide Best Restaurant Award in its first year and has rated consistently ever since, receiving two chefs hats in the 1996-7 Guide. Under restaurateur Roberto Scheriani's exacting eye, the food is of high quality, the furnishings hip and the service attentive and welcoming.

As you descend into this underground haven, you are immediately struck by the set-up which ensures that Roberto's is an ideal venue for any function - large or small, professional or social. An expansive bar area (an important prerequisite for any admission luncheon!) sits squarely in the middle of the room and is complemented by the booths on the fringes of the restaurant, giving the place a casual yet stylish atmosphere. On this particular day, a number of large round and long tables had been set up between the bar and the booths to host the myriad of special occasion luncheons, however, there was also plenty of room for the more intimate tables for two.

You cannot help but notice the "Wine Wall" (as we came to affectionately call it) to the right of the stairs - and Roberto's, as national runner-up in the Qantas Wine List Awards has every right to be proud of such an impressive display. The staff are also more than keen to advise young players as to the most appropriate wine to compliment your meal - trust them - they are always right!

Specialising in Northern Italian cuisine, Roberto insists on using only the best ingredients. His mother likes to tell the story of how as a youngster in a Naples restaurant he cried, "This food stinks!" after being given a plate of lasagne. No sooner was the dish removed, all the diners in the party were sending their dishes back!

It would be surprising indeed if a meal was ever sent back to the Roberto's kitchen, particularly by this hungry horde of

revellers. To begin, the majority of our party chose the Calamari Ripieni and were extremely pleased with their selection. Forget soggy deep-fried calamari rings with cold chips. Roberto's calamari is a delight - delicious char-grilled tubes of calamari filled with a fresh seafood risotto and served on tomato salsa and rocket salad. Other items included a typically Italian minestrone - thick and rich and loaded with chunky vegetables - and one brave person tucked in to the lightly crumbed lamb's brains which were light and fluffy and much tastier than this intrepid reviewer imagined brains could be!

After these taste sensations, we were suitably primed for our main courses. And we were not disappointed. A number of dishes were devoured, including potato and cheese ravioli served in quail ragu and braised rabbit marinated in white wine. The best selection undoubtedly went to the Cotoletta Milanese - two huge and deliciously soft veal scaloppine crumbed in parsley and parmesan soaked breadcrumbs and served with a variety of tossed summer vegetables. In a word - YUM!

Just after we'd pushed our chairs away from the table to give our ever-increasing girths more room, the word "dessert" was whispered. There were groans of horror from the majority at such gluttony but some hardy three-course devotees managed to squeeze in Tiramisu while the more conservative opted for homemade gelati and almond bread. The Roberto's dessert list is actually much more adventurous than this with such temptations as hot white chocolate pudding served with dark chocolate sauce and baked apple and custard tart with hazelnut and toffee sauce. Unfortunately, some adventures have to be saved for another time, and preferably when the adventurers can appreciate them in all their glory!

RATING: A magnificent luncheon experience at the top-end of town with not so top-end prices. A definite venue for special or celebratory occasions or simply to treat yourself. (Warning - do not overstay your welcome though, Roberto's closes after lunch and reopens later for dinner.)

Ristorante Roberto
31 Russell Street Melbourne
Bookings: Tel. 9650-3399 Fax. 9650 1527
Open for lunch : Mon-Fri 12pm til 3
Open for dinner : Mon-Sun 6pm til late