

Appetizing delights

Niko's shrimp worth the drive to Kensington



While Niko's Bistro concentrates on Italian food, one exception is its coconut shrimp, which may be the best in the city.

Jenelle Schneider, Calgary Herald

Kathy Richardier, For The Calgary Herald

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My friend Marlene has been raving about this place since she visited Croatia last summer. Croatia seems to be the place to go these days. Well, Niko's Bistro isn't about Croatian food, it's about Italian food, but the owner, Niko Miletic, is Croatian.

His cheffing antecedents are with La Brezza working with one of Calgary's fine chefs, Michele Aurigemma, now at Q Haute Cuisine.

You may remember Merle's Deli, next to Charlie's Bakery on Kensington Road. Merle's has totally morphed into Niko's, and a fine morphization it is, indeed.

Niko's space is charmingly bistro-like, with a colourful orange and cream banquette along one wall offsetting dark tables and chairs featuring big cloth napkins.

Cloth is always a good thing.

Margie and I dropped in one day for lunch and discovered that owner/chef, Niko, is as agreeable as his space.

Though only four months old, it seems as if Niko's is on its way to adding its charisma to the already well-established Kensington food scene.

And because the menu is Italian, it can't go wrong. We love our Italian.

An Italian menu, that is, except for one appetizer item that caught the chef's fancy and is now one of the restaurant's most popular dishes. Naturally we ordered it: tempura coconut shrimp with a sweet chile dipping sauce (\$9).

You have probably seen coconut shrimp on just about every casual dining menu in the city, but these might be some of the best you'll taste. Large, plump shrimp are butterflied, tempura-battered, doused in coconut, deep fried to a crisp, hot crunchiness, and served with a splash of dressed greens on the side.

We were tempted to order about five of these and call it a meal.

The calamari all'inferno are also noteworthy (\$8). Tender squid rings lightly fried and lightly coated in spicy tomato sauce offer a slight crunch and a bit of heat.

Light is the operative word, which is why this dish works so well.

Solid and satisfying, though a bit over-sauced for our taste, the manicotti -- made with house-made crepes -- was tender and mild, its tomato sauce smoothed with sweet pepper (\$12).

Tomato sauce, too, was the overwhelming feature of the osso buco (\$18).

A highlight of osso buco, for those who know and love it, is the palate-perking gremolata of minced garlic, parsley and lemon zest tossed generously over the top. If it was on ours, it got lost in the tomatoes. This dish could use some work, reduce the tomatoes and let the other flavours assert themselves.

Osso buco is such a delicious, long-simmered, rustic country dish.

A warm bundle of puff-pastry apple strudel (\$7) decked with vanilla ice cream and lots of caramel slather -- we love caramel -- finished us off rather nicely . . . for what turned out to be The Meal of The Day.

Go see Niko -- you will like him. (Niko says if you have a fabulous bottle of wine he does not carry, bring it for a \$15 corkage.)

Niko's Bistro

1241 Kensington Rd. N.W.

270-0082

Food: generally good

Service: pleasant, attentive

Specialty: Italian

Prices: \$11 to \$18, main dishes

Hours: 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., Monday to Friday; 5 p.m. to 9 p.m., Sunday to Thursday; 5 p.m. to 10 p.m., Friday and Saturday; 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., Saturday and Sunday brunch

Credit: Visa, MasterCard, Amex, Interac

Reservations: accepted

Parking: on-street

Wheelchair access: yes

Washrooms: clean, wheelchair accessible

No smoking area: no smoking at all

Licensed: yes