

## A traditional favorite



By Michael Philippi  
Ungaretti & Harris • Restaurant Critic

**I**talian food is just better and I can prove it. Name your three favorite Italian restaurants. Now name your three favorite Irish ones. With apologies to half the Cook County judiciary — point made.

In my family, food is love. And if food is love, then La Scarola is the corner of Cupid and Eros. Adorned by a rusty awning, it's actually on West Grand, just east of Halsted, in the neighborhood some will remember as the Patch. It has been serving up some of the finest southern Italian comfort food in the city for a long time. It's small, a little noisy when crowded, and the walls are full of pictures of celebrities who come there for the same reason we do — the food.

We went there for lunch. I have been there for dinner too. Lunch is great. Dinner is spectacular. If you go there once for dinner Armando will greet you warmly. If you go twice you are family.

Start with the escarole soup. Escarole is like spinach, only better, particularly when it is cooked just right — *al dente* — just like the pasta that comes later. It comes in a chicken stock and is served piping hot. Resist the urge to have more because there is sausage and peppers, calamari and an antipasto next. Sausage without enough fennel might as well be a hot dog, and this is no ball park frank. Cut in bite-sized pieces bursting with fennel served with green and red peppers seared black on the edges, it's as good as it gets.

Antipasto trays are staples of Italian restaurants, and this isn't one you want to miss. Italian-flag colors are proudly displayed in the broiled peppers, artichokes, tomatoes and fresh mozzarella, and very lean prosciutto. Actually, all the dishes are presented beautifully; the only complaint from our table was that lighting was a little too dim.

The regular menu is a proven winner, but each day there is a special sheet that should be carefully reviewed. The entrees are well-portioned and diverse. We had pasta rapini, which is shell-shaped pasta served with rapini — a textured, slightly bitter green-sausage, prosciutto and eggplant. Hot and rich; if you closed your eyes you were in Sicily.

Sadly, they were out of the broiled whitefish served over spinach with capers and pine nuts,



which is worth the trip. The salmon was a worthy substitute, though, pan-seared, crispy on the outside and moist in the middle with black olives and spinach. The chicken choice is always hard to make. After much debate we went with pollo marsala, opting for basic over adventuresome. Interestingly, it was served with garlic mashed potatoes, which was actually a nice change from pasta.

And then there's the veal. I can't promise that "it's the best in the city." I haven't been to every place (yet), but it's pretty amazing and comes in lots of styles. The veal Milanese is huge and so good you want to go with old friends so you can pick it up and gnaw on it. At lunch we asked for veal francesca, which came

in six palm-sized medallions in a garlicky, buttery lemon sauce layered over spinach. Plenty and yum.

Yes, you do have room for dessert. At least an espresso and you might as well try a cannoli — hard shell, not a hint of sogginess, with fresh and not too sweet ricotta. Or maybe the tiramisu, perfectly layered lady fingers with a liquor-soggy bottom layer and a big coffee and mascarpone flavor throughout. Just to make sure we were really in Chicago and not Milan, we ordered the cheesecake too. Yep, this was rich, crumb-crust Chicago cheesecake.

Lagniappe: If you can stop at Richard's Bar next door before or after, it bills itself as the best dive bar in a city, and it's hard to think of one better. Definitely the best jukebox.

Traveler's tip: I used to go to San Diego a lot, which meant I went to restaurants a lot. After a while, mostly we went to de'Medici on Fifth Avenue in the Gaslamp Quarter. San Diego isn't the same little city it was then, but de'Medici hasn't changed a bit. Mario greeted me like an old friend (then I realized he greets everyone that way) and served up swordfish loin on a stainless dish with a ring of mashed potatoes, some spinach and asparagus. Tender and moist, loin is different from the sometimes-dry steak that places usually serve. Try the clams too. This is an old school place, complete with the Rat Pack soundtrack and a small, ornate dining room. ■

### Pleadings:

La Scarola Restaurant  
721 W. Grand Ave.  
(312) 243-1740

### Court costs:

Appetizers: \$4.95-\$10.50  
Entrees: \$15.50-\$30.95

### Verdict:

mphilippi@uhlaw.com