

A Little Bit of Tuscany

A Little Bit of Tuscany is just that. It's as if a tidy new restaurant from an Italian town popular with tourists—Siena, or Florence, for example—dropped into a brick storefront on Main Street in Westminster, hired a few locals to wait on tables, and got to work.

Entering, you might pause for a moment, thinking you're in a gift shop—that maybe the restaurant is next door or in the back. There are displays of Florentine notepaper, hand-painted ceramic bowls, lotion made with olive oil and lemons—the sort of stuff you see, and want to buy, on a holiday in Italy. Indeed, the goodies are all for sale. (The restaurant's motto is: "Eat a little...drink a little...shop a little bit of Tuscany.") There's a bakery case with layer cakes and nests of fresh pasta, bins of wine along the hallway to the back room (which is, incidentally, far more restaurant-like than the front: dimly lit, with a pressed tin ceiling and an intimate banquette).

A Little Bit of Tuscany has a bright, untrodden feel with a colorful sunflower-themed décor and terra-cotta accents. It's the kind of place where you might stop for a lemon soda or an espresso (and a gift for your sister-in-law) before heading off to see the local frescoes or fountain in the square. But you are, after all, in Westminster.

As it turns out, it doesn't matter where you are as you dig into a thin-crust pizza dotted with lumps of fresh buffalo mozzarella and leaves of fresh basil, or dip slices of crisp grilled bread into a ramekin of tangy mushroom and raclette cheese fondue.

The simple menu features small plates in a handful of categories—antipasti, insalate, bruschette, pizze, and panini. Pasta choices and more substantial dishes are announced by the wait-staff, though meat and fish entrees only appear on weekends.

Glancing around the room on a weeknight, we had the impression that this is a casual backup for well-heeled locals who might not feel like opening the fridge or a girls-night-out venue, where "girls" of a certain age might enjoy a glass or bottle from an extensive Italian wine list while grazing on cheese and salami. (All meats and cheeses are imported from Italy.)

We started with the beef carpaccio and arugula salad, beautifully presented—the paper-thin meat arranged like flower petals around the plate with a pyramid of greens supported by wedges of pears in the center, nicely dressed in olive oil. The plate was scat-

tered with chunks of potato coated in a creamy dressing. Nothing was overdone or overdressed in this essentially simple dish.

We couldn't decide between the evening's two pasta choices (or the two sauces), so we ordered both—the plates are small, we were assured. The four crescent-shaped ravioli were filled with sweet sausage and ricotta, the red sauce enhanced by a smidgen of cream and red wine. We also decided on the freshly made fettucine with the white-wine sauce, likewise tomato-based and tasting of summer.

Courses tend to roll out when they're ready. While our salad came *pronto*, we lingered for some time awaiting the next plate—or three: the pasta dishes and pizza then arrived together, creating some clutter on the table. This seems to be the norm at small-plate restaurants, where the kitchen just cranks out dishes and sends them on their way.

A Little Bit of Tuscany has been in business for a little more than a year, and we'd heard raves—not just about the food, but about the warmth of owners Rose and Kirk Seaman. (Kirk's law office shares the building.) Sure enough, Rose Seaman (nee Calcaro—her father came to the U.S. from Naples in 1952) is a constant presence, stopping at tables to make sure we liked the wine we'd chosen (we did!), chatting with customers about the price of smoked glass from Murano, and bustling out with a cup of camomile tea for a patron's scratchy throat.

The dessert offerings were mostly layer cakes, including chocolate hazelnut and lemon mascarpone. We tried the cannoli cake—a yellow sponge cake layered with a mascarpone-based frosting and sprinkled with bits of crushed cookie shells. Our waitress had forgotten to tell us that real cannoli was also available. But we enjoyed the twist on the traditional dessert. This is after all, A Little Bit of Tuscany, not the entire region.

We'd heard raves—not just about the food, but about the warmth of owners Rose and Kirk Seaman.

A Little Bit of Tuscany, 84 E. Main St., Westminster. 410-857-4422, alittlebitoftuscany.com. Serves lunch and dinner. Hours: 12-8 p.m. Sun. and Wed.; 12-10 p.m. Thurs.-Sat. Small plates: \$6.50-13. Shared antipasti platters (for four-five), \$24-26; entrees, \$15-28; desserts: \$5-8.