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Brio beautiful, delicious, fantastic

It all sums up the venerable restaurant that has consistently drawn crowds

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SUSAN SWAGLER

[BRIO TUSCAN GRILLE, 591 Brookwood Village, 879-9177]

Since it opened in Colonial Brookwood Village several years ago, Brio Tuscan Grille has been consistently packing in the customers. Before 7 on a Friday night, you'll still encounter a 30-minute wait.

The place is beautiful and elegantly casual. Walls of windows, a bustling open kitchen, a cozy wood-fed oven and lovely lighting make Brio a nice destination day or night. The patio is pretty - especially if you turn away from Lakeshore Drive and toward the large, splashing fountain and the storefront shopping beyond it. At night, tiny lights in the trees and the sounds from that fountain make outdoor dining magical. All this and reliably good, inventive tastes of Tuscany, made with quality, fresh ingredients by folks who know what they're doing, keep people coming back. Service can be hit or miss, but judging from the full dining room and the wait list for seating, clearly that's tolerated.

On a recent Friday night, we opted for outdoor seating because it became available before a table inside. We had been waiting near the fireplace outside the front door, and that was pleasant except for the smokers gathered around it.

Our prompt patio seating was not without an unpleasant consequence. The chairs outside are the most uncomfortable we've ever encountered. They look beautiful - wrought iron and a wicker-like basket weave with an eye-catching design that celebrates form over function. The seat is wedge shaped with the narrower end at the back: It's wider in the thigh area than in the seat. In spite of all my eating out, I don't have a whole lot of junk in my trunk (and neither do any of my dining partners), but we all had unsightly overlaps and we were squirming uncomfortably by the end of our meal. However, the good food did distract us.

We started with a shared bowl of roasted garlic, spinach and artichoke dip (\$6.95) served with crisp triangles of herb-flecked flatbread. This rich, creamy appetizer was absolutely delicious.

We added salads to our entrees for \$3.50. The Bistecca Insalata is a fresh, ice-cold wedge of iceberg lettuce topped with chopped bacon; chunks of Gorgonzola; diced, juicy Roma tomatoes; and a thick, creamy Parmesan dressing. The Caesar salad features an appropriately garlicky dressing and housemade focaccia croutons. The chopped salad is a zesty mix of fresh greens, tomatoes, black olives, diced onion, cucumber and feta tossed in a tasty red-wine vinaigrette.

The sacchetti formaggio (\$14.50) was spicier than we anticipated. In this dish, a rich Parmigiano-Reggiano cream sauce complemented tender, ricotta-filled pasta pouches, savory prosciutto and toasted pine nut pieces.

That day's fresh fish selection (about \$30) was halibut and scallops - both cooked expertly and drizzled with a sweet balsamic reduction. Sides of mashed potatoes and colorful, wood-roasted root vegetables were seasonally appropriate and tasty.

The Filetto di Manzo Toscano (\$26.50) was an 8-ounce center-cut filet cooked to our medium request. The

outside, with a sprinkle of seasoning, had a nice, crusty char, and the inside was tender and juicy. Mashed potatoes and grilled asparagus were the sides.

Lobster risotto (\$19.95) was a delicious dish. The creamy, rich risotto, made with a roasted garlic pesto, held chunks of mostly claw meat, mild leeks, juicy Roma tomatoes and asparagus. A drizzle of lemon oil brightened the taste in a subtle, beautiful way.

We finished our meal with a shared trio of creme brulees - vanilla, chocolate and cinnamon-scented pumpkin. It was hard to choose a favorite, as they were all delectable.

Service on this visit was friendly but inattentive. Our server forgot the drink order from our teen diner, (we had to ask two other people before we got her a drink), she poured our wine unevenly, and we had to ask for bread. She, on the other hand, didn't bother to ask how we were doing after someone else delivered our food. Then we had to wait a while in those torturous chairs for our check.

On a subsequent lunch visit, we asked to sit inside where the chairs are padded and much more comfortable. My husband, young son and I started with a shared plate of crispy, fried calamari tossed with bits of fried pepperoncini (\$7.95) The squid was tender within a batter that was nice and crunchy albeit a little bland. A sprinkle of salt helped.

The kids' menu at Brio is generous and fun with many food choices and several pages of puzzles and games. This is perhaps the most thoughtful kids' menu in town. Little diners can choose from the usual chicken fingers and mac and cheese as well as grilled salmon and pork chops. There are pasta dishes (lasagna, ravioli formaggio, pasta Alfredo and spaghetti) along with fried shrimp, grilled chicken and chicken Parmesan. Our son chose to make his own pizza - a wood-grilled, crisp flatbread topped with zesty tomato sauce, bacon, sausage and good-quality pepperoni. Prices on the kids' menu range from \$4.50 to \$7.95.

The wood-grilled salmon salad (\$13.95) featured a nice-sized piece of fresh, smoky salmon atop a salad of fresh, mixed greens; asparagus; feta; and diced tomatoes tossed with a balsamic vinaigrette. A mound of crispy shoestring potatoes topped it all.

I loved the rich, earthy mushroom ravioli (\$9.95). Large, delicate pasta pockets held a savory mix of mushrooms. Tender chunks of butternut squash and pieces of Gorgonzola Dolce glistened with brown butter. Finally, pieces of fried sage and a drizzle of truffle oil made for a mouth-watering dish.

Service on this visit was wonderful. Our waiter was friendly, helpful with the menu and considerate. He kept our glasses full; he replenished our bread without being asked. When my son and I stepped outside to look at Shades Creek while waiting on our dessert, he came and found us before the coffee and desserts got cold.

Brio is a fantastic restaurant. The decor is beautiful, the food delicious and the dishes creative. But if all the staff would learn to treat customers as guests, it could be even better.

Susan Swagler is a free-lance restaurant reviewer for The Birmingham News.

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