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Restaurant review: Pasta Fina****

I have eaten chicken soup all over the city and points beyond. It has ranged in quality from pitiful broth with stray slivers of meat to veritable stews in a soup bowl, swamped with thick dumpling noodles, vegetables, and pieces of chicken in every spoonful.

But the best I've had - the chicken soup sterling, ranking above all others - is served at Pasta Fina in South Toledo.

A modest little restaurant in a strip mall at Heatherdowns Boulevard and Perrysburg-Holland Road, Pasta Fina brings chicken soup to new, glorious heights. Here, it's called Italian Chicken Pasta soup, a symphony of flavors and textures that can only be called sublime.

The more I eat, the more I want. Served with a scattering of fresh basil and parmesan on the wide-rimmed bowl, the intensely flavored soup swirls with white and dark meat, bowtie pasta, barley, pimiento, shreds of spinach, and herbs that add a subtle kick to the rich broth. Order it alone for \$4.95 or with a dinner or sandwich for \$2.50. Happy to say, the chicken soup and the \$5.50 seafood tomato bisque, also praiseworthy, are available daily.

True to its name, the restaurant, simply decorated with booths and tables surrounded by chocolate and cream-colored walls, specializes in pasta dishes: mix-and-match noodles and sauces as well as such "pastabili- ties" as linguine with clam sauce, seafood Alfredo with fettuccine, and salmon a la Grecque with Greek feta, spinach, onions, and kalamata olives. A separate listing includes eggplant parmigiana, veal or chicken meals, lasagna, ziti, ravioli, and pizza pasta bake.

The kitchen also grills decent flat-iron steaks in a variety of styles, as well as prepares a dozen gourmet pizzas, paninis, wraps, and the usual assortment of appetizers, salads, and desserts. Alcoholic beverages, including Italian wines, are also available.

My first experience at Pasta Fina a couple of years ago didn't make much of an impression. The grilled portabello panini with roasted peppers, cheeses, and balsamic vinaigrette was tasty enough,

PASTA FINA

Address: 5931 Heatherdowns Blvd.

Phone: 419-866-0670.

Category: Dress down.

Menu: Italian-American.

Hours: 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Tuesday-

Thursday; 11 a.m. to 10 p.m.

Friday; 4 to 10 p.m. Saturday.

Reservations are accepted.

Wheelchair access: Yes.

Average price: \$\$.

Credit cards: AE, DIS, MC, V.

Ratings: ooooo Outstanding;

oooo Very good; ooo Good;

oo Fair; o Poor.

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but the veal parmesan with spaghetti and marinara struck me as mediocre. Several recent visits later, I can only surmise that I was off my feed that day, because almost everything I've tried since then has been better than average.

That would include succulent baby clams oreganato in a scrumptious cream liquor (\$7.50); chicken lasagna (\$7.95) studded with meat; steak a la Pasta Fina (\$16.99) with mushrooms, peppers, caramelized onions, garlic, and pasta carbonara; garlic shrimp with vegetables over a big mound of angel hair pasta (\$15.50), and rigatoni with Italian sausage Millano (\$12.50).

Among the sandwiches, all \$5.99, were a terrific Italian wrap stuffed with salami, mortadella, capicola, pepperoni, provolone, vegetables, and creamy Italian dressing, and a monster sub with mozzarella and marinara sauce over two boulder-sized meatballs. Less exciting was the California chicken pizza (\$6.99 to \$16.99), billed as the house specialty, which was a mishmash of chicken, bacon, melted cheese, and veggies on a rather too-thick crust.

Word from the kitchen has it that a second Pasta Fina is planned in Bedford Township, as part of a foray into franchising the business. If that is so, it would be a crime not to include the Italian chicken pasta soup on the menu.

To my mind, at least, it's the real chicken soup for the soul.

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