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the steele fork: no carb skimping here

by jarrett steele

IN THE ERA OF THE REVILED CARBOHYDRATE, no cuisine is more maligned than the great standby of the old world – Italian. I'll admit I haven't been there and I don't profess to know about the variances between Italy's Northern and Southern cuisine. But my Midwest upbringing does qualify me to comment on a solid hunk of lasagna, an ample serving of toasted ravioli and other Americanized versions of that carb-laden cookery.

North of Stonebriar Centre, where Preston returns to its humble farm-road roots, Leonardo's sits in what looks like a miniature mid-1970's shopping and office development. It's an Italian restaurant in an older Frisco neighborhood, just on the edge of the bustling development.

Though one wall by the front door showcases headshot photos of quasi-famous faces that have passed through the doors, the wall behind the cash register reveals a more telling sign of the clientele – a mosaic of snapshots of kids and families.

It's not a bistro and the menu selections aren't trendy. You won't find a wood-fired oven with goat-cheese, prosciutto and artichoke pizzas with white sauce on the menu. Instead, Leonardo's features dependable, affordable and traditional Italian entrées that families expect when taking the kids out for dinner.

Virtually all of the selections are around \$10, from fettuccines to tortellinis to the hot heroes with Italian sausage and peppers. Everything we tried tasted homemade, although the menu was dauntingly extensive. Spaghetti dinners (\$7-\$8) are offered with meatballs or mushrooms or six other ways.

Complimentary garlic rolls were not the doughy soft, butter-oily type we expected, but were instead large and dense with a biscuit-like quality, lightly dusted with garlic powder. We spread the whipped butter and began the carb-fest.

Our stuffed mushroom caps appetizer (\$6) featured six plump white criminis in a butter and minced garlic bath, topped off with a generous dollop of crabmeat, Italian breadcrumbs, parmesan, oregano and other herbs. My dining companion was unimpressed, but warmed up to her chicken Florentine, which included tender

sautéed breast chunks, interspersed with spinach and roma tomatoes. The creaminess of the Alfredo sauce was minimized by a touch of marinara, which colored it a nice pinkish hue and kept it from being too rich.

My chicken parmigiana was a flat, heavily breaded split breast cooked well and generously smothered in melted mozzarella and a delicious mildly tangy red marinara. It took a lot of bites to get to the end of the accompanying spaghetti ... I couldn't remember the last time I twirled up this verboten food on the spoon.

The kid's menu (\$5) doesn't deviate into the burger and fries or grilled cheese alternatives. The tots can devour spaghetti and meatballs or child-sized portions of manicotti.

The dining room, half-full on a weekend night, remained at a moderately ambient noise level. Décor is pretty non-descript, with hardwood floors and windows throughout. The red and white-checked tablecloths (albeit plastic) and large red Coke tumblers seemed appropriate; the wine selection is as extensive as your party's taste (it's bring your own).

Our server belongs at every other restaurant the Fork's tines dig into. She was remarkably attentive without being intrusive, checking on us and graciously thanking us for visiting. The pacing was perfect for a relaxed night out. When asked for a recommendation, she matter-of-factly suggested what she would order and why. She even candidly characterized the house Marsala sauce as bland and we were better off for it.

Mostly "carbed" out, we passed on the house desserts. But it wasn't long until we headed south toward retail-o-rama and came upon the storefront with the blazing red and yellow "hot now" neon sign. A dozen original glazed sent us off sweetly into the hot Frisco July night.

Leonardo's Italian Restaurant

9741 Preston Road
Frisco, Texas
(972)335-1244

Lunch, Dinner
MC, V, AE

Food	
Service	
Atmosphere	
Value	

(scale of five forks)



Jarrett Steele is a writer living on the verge of Frisco. When his fork isn't busy sampling new and interesting restaurants in town, you'll find him kicking back and grilling out.