

FOOD DRINK REVIEW

BY DOTTY GRIFFITH

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOEL LDESCHMAN



BLUE STATE: Beginning with the classically-inspired striped awning, Villa-O recalls the Italian seaside. **Left:** American mac 'n cheese.

O-YEAH! *Robert Colombo's new Italian hotspot is making waves and satisfying foodies*

Villa-O, the latest initial-obsessed venue to woo Dallas, is not another notch in the Oprah empire. No, "o" channels "organic, original, oceanic."

So, is Villa-O an osteria? A trattoria? A pizzeria? A pastaria? Some of all of the above, but with décor that leaves one wondering: Don't portholes and cleats connote seafood?

The idea, according to Robert Colombo, one of the founding partners of Villa-O, Trece (across the street) and The Club, is coastal Italian à la the isle of Capri. Lots of boat details and polished mahogany define the interior. The exterior's blue and white awnings make the Villa-O space stand out from the flat panel front of the Travis Street center it occupies. The décor, drawing from the classic, highly polished wooden runabout boats, suggests Italy's famed Amalfi Coast.

That said, the menu is generic Italian. There are some really luscious offerings here, as well as some misses that could be attributed to opening month jitters when we visited in February.

Start with Mediterranean mussels that were as big and plump as any I've ever had, and, undoubtedly, the freshest tasting. Anywhere. Anytime. Period. Yes, serving the black-shelled bivalves in a true blue, tear-shaped Staub enameled cast iron pot is a nice touch. But it was the clean (dare I use the word pristine?) flavor of the mussels bathed in a light yet redolent tomato sauce that made this such a surprising offering. These lived up to my vivid

imagination. And I couldn't keep my garlic toast out of the pan juices.

Portobello mushroom fries sound so much more sophisticated than fried 'shrooms and they are. These are cross-cuts (long, like French fries) of big, meaty portobellos with a crunchy, not tough, crust. Served with tomato basil aioli, fried portobello fingers make great nibbling while sipping one of the "50 great wines under \$100."

As you no doubt hope, that is the bottle price. By the glass, with a few around \$8 upward to \$30-plus, some would easily tally more than a Ben Franklin were it not for the cap. Because it uses the patented Le Verre de Vin wine preservation system to maintain freshness of uncorked still, sparkling and fortified wines, Villa-O serves any wine on its list by the glass, half or whole bottle.

Flavors here can be big, really big. Caesar salad, generous enough to share, is as bold with garlic and salty anchovy as the no-holds-barred reputation of the Roman emperor. It restores my faith in the salad that has become so diluted by its universal popularity. Among the entrées, grilled branzino (Mediterranean sea bass) served with spinach and a lemon emulsion similar to a Hollandaise was a lovely offering.

Our favorite pasta was the American-style mac made with zesty Italian cheeses. With a golden crumb topping, creamy pearl white sauce coats the macaroni instead of orange-yellow glop. We liked it better than the Italian pasta preparations.

Fusilli with Bolognese was nicely al dente but the **CONTINUED...**



VILLA-O 4514 TRAVIS ST., 214.780.1980, WWW.VILLARESTAURANT.COM. MONDAY-SATURDAY 5pm TO CLOSE; SUNDAY 10:30am-10pm. **NO RESERVATIONS** NONE. NADA. ZERO. BUT TABLES TURN FAST EVEN WHEN THE PLACE IS CROWDED. AND THERE'S A COMFY LOUNGE AREA IF YOU'RE WAITING OR JUST SIPPING AND SNACKING. **WHO'S IN CHARGE?** VINCENZO INDELICATO, EXECUTIVE CHEF OF THE CLUB, IS THE CONCEPT CHEF. DALLAS FIRST GOT TO KNOW HIM AT NICOLA'S RISTORANTE ITALIANO. REK TURNER RUNS THE KITCHEN ON A DAILY BASIS. HE'S AN ALUM OF NICK AND SAM'S, CAFÉ TOULOUSE AND THE COYOTE CAFÉ AT LAS VEGAS' MGM GRAND. **WATCH OUT:** CIGUAGAR SIGHTINGS AT THE BAR ARE INEVITABLE. **GOOD DEAL:** SUNDAY IS FAMILY DAY WHEN CHILDREN 15 AND UNDER EAT FREE, INCLUDING SUNDAY BRUNCH. FROM 3pm TO 10pm, THREE-COURSE MENU AVAILABLE FOR \$15.95 PER PERSON, UNLIMITED HELPINGS. **RATING:** ★★★

What the stars mean: 1 = fair; some noteworthy qualities; 2 = good, above average; 3 = very good, well above norm; 4 = excellent, among the area's best; 5 = world-class, extraordinary in every detail. Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambience and service.



NAUTICAL CHIC: No red-checked tablecloths here! In our restaurant upscale naut. Top left: Potatoes fries with onions and cheese.

...CONTINUED sauce lacked a certain richness, an élan that distinguishes the classic from mere meat sauce. My mouth was sad. Spinach fettuccini was soggy although the marinara was vibrant. My mouth was glad, if not ecstatic.

Once the line cooks get more familiar with the kitchen's wok system, the menu can live up to its bravura. Plated to order, slightly pre-cooked pastas are first refreshed in boiling water then finished with the sauce in a wok. This makes for fast preparation over very high heat, efficient but not consistent a month into opening.

Wood-fired ovens should produce magnificent pizza. On neither visit, though, did pizza meet expectations. The Rustica, with sausage, cipollini onions and roasted peppers, should have screamed Italian countryside, but a floppy crust diminished the impact of the toppings. A second try, the Chef's Favorite with roasted tomatoes, basil pesto, goat cheese and garlic had a crisper edge, but still the perfect-looking thin crust was undermined by a soggy bottom.

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Desserts are large and luxe. Vanilla Budin Carmello is a cross between flan and crème caramel and pleases those of us with a weakness for all things creamy. Mascarpone cheesecake with almond-biscotti crust also hit its mark. But chocolate mousse cake tasted dry, despite the fluffy milk-colored filling between the dark, oppressively heavy layers.

Villa-O may have suffered from its early success. Jammed since opening with a crowd of foodies and Park Cities neighbors, the

restaurant hasn't had much time to find its rhythm. It doesn't take reservations and it was filled most evenings the first month. Service can be maddeningly slow or annoyingly over-attentive. Getting seated wasn't a problem. Unfortunately, the slow down came at table between courses. On another visit, all courses were unceremoniously dumped on the table all at once.

There is a lot to love about Villa-O and more that can become lovable. The vision is clear but some of the details need work. ■