

TONY'S FAMILY RESTAURANT FEELS LIKE HOME

BYLINE: Yolanda Wright - Contributing writer, Syracuse Post-Standard

There's something comforting about a restaurant with "family" in its name and not just as a tag-line.

Tony's is family-owned, family-run and, not surprisingly, a popular spot for diners looking for good food, service and prices.

Co-owned by Tony Albanese, mayor of East Syracuse, and his brother Michael, Tony's Family Restaurant has been luring fans who range from toddlers to grandparents and everyone else since it opened about five years ago.

On a recent Friday evening we joined regulars who knew enough to save room for homemade pies and a pre-schooler who was smart enough to order chicken fingers as soon as she leaped into a roomy booth with her parents and distanced herself from a baby sister who presided from a high chair at one end of the table.

Service was remarkably attentive in our unpretentious dining room where slatted blinds cover the windows and burgundy upholstered booths and bare tables are topped with white paper mats and napkins.

Tony's dinner menu offers appetizers (\$3.95 to \$8.95), soups and salads, steaks and chops (\$12.95 and \$13.95), chicken (\$8.95 and \$9.50), three veal dishes (\$10.95), homemade Italian specials (\$7.95 to \$10.95), seafood (\$9.95 to \$11.95), pizzas, burgers and sandwiches.

Entrees include soup or salad, potato or pasta and Italian bread, and children have five choices (\$4.95 each) on a special menu.

From a small list of wines by the bottle and glass, we chose a familiar bottle of Folonari pinot grigio (\$14.95), delivered open in a cooler with ice. We poured our own wine.

We started with cups of hot soup, included with entrees, and a fresh-tasting house salad (\$1.99, with entree). The evening special, chicken and pastina soup was first-rate. A flavorful chicken broth with chunks of chicken breast and tender pasta dots made a perfect starter.

Despite being heralded as most restaurants' Friday darling, clam chowder took a dive at first bite. Unappetizingly thick with potato overkill, the cup sported only three clam bits and little clam flavor.

Although predictable, the salad fared better with chopped iceberg lettuce topped with shredded carrots and red cabbage, two cucumber slices, a cherry tomato, red onion slices and an olive. On the side, commercial Italian dressing added a zesty kick.

The entree prize was no contest as soon as a hot plate of chicken Francaise (\$8.95) was tasted.

Thick enough to carry real chicken flavor and large enough to serve two hungry diners, a whole boneless breast coated in egg batter was lightly sauteed with lemon, butter and white wine for a delicate but satisfying feast garnished with lemon slices. Ziti with marinara sauce was a good companion.

A baked potato stole the limelight when it partnered a large deep-fried haddock fillet (\$9.95) with a chewy interior that suggested over cooking and a tepid temperature that can occur when a dish is plated too long before it is served. Tartar sauce and a side of good cole slaw were especially good.

The restaurant has an interesting roster of regular daily specials, with meat loaf on Tuesday, roasted turkey on Wednesday, stuffed peppers on Thursday, haddock on Friday, prime rib on Saturday and pot roast on Sunday. Other menu choices offer lasagna, rigatoni, stuffed shells or manicotti (\$9.95), New York strip steak or sirloin (\$13.95) and chicken Parmesan (\$9.95).

Desserts, especially homemade pies, should be mandatory indulgences here, and ours even improved the second time they were served. Our waitress called the pies "awesome" and agreed to serve apple and berry pies (\$2.95 each) warm, but they came out cold. She tried again, and we seconded her call, especially for apple, my favorite.

Service was cheerful, knowledgeable and super-careful about removing used dishes and asking for reactions to food. She even gave a man in the booth next to ours three hugs, after he asked for them. Now that's all in the family.

Yolanda Wright's weekly "Dining Out" review is based on an unannounced, anonymous visit. An A-to-Z listing of many of the reviews is available at www.syracuse.com/dining/.