

Milan in the Back Bay

Ultra-fresh fare in fashionably spare surroundings



IT WAS A FLUKE—not happenstance, but the fish—that epitomized our visit to Via Matta, the stylish new restaurant across the street from the Park Plaza Hotel. The piping-hot flounder (\$25) arrived in a neat parchment package and was sliced open by our waiter to emit a rush of steam infused with fennel, lemon, and black truffles—exceptionally subtle, simple, fresh seasonings that, in the hands of chef Luis Morales, transformed the flat, plain fish into Cinderella.

Similarly, the restaurant's large, high-ceilinged dining room, painted a stark white—clean and sparse—relies on the prosperous, colorful guests and ubiquitous

Above: The dining room and bar are festively packed—even on a weeknight.

black-coated staff to spice up the atmosphere. And they do. As the crowd thickens, Via Matta (“crazy street”) feels like a party in a rich artist’s loft—or a slice of Milanese nightlife magically inserted into the staid Back Bay.

Tremendous buzz followed the June opening of this restaurant by Michael Schlow and Christopher Myers, two-thirds of the trio behind Radius, the sleek French spot in the financial district. We found a mix of (glamorous) internationals and Yankees—young and old alike—who sat merrily in the café, bar, and dining room, enjoy-

ing tantalizing, almost rustic, food expertly served.

Bread, cut at a long polished wooden table in the center of the dining room, is the primary starch available. We started with the not-to-be-missed crunchy eggplant appetizer (\$9): silky vegetable innards surrounded by bread-crumbs walls and topped with sweet, juicy tomatoes—a vegetarian’s filet mignon. The ultra-fresh *antipasto di magro* (\$10) included crisp green and waxed beans in a gentle vinaigrette, cannellini beans with sage, zucchini slivers, tart olives, and pickled red onions. It became the ying to the *salumi misti*’s yang: the cured meat plate (\$14) featured at least five items, among them *bresaola* (air-dried, salted beef) and outstanding spicy *sopressata* (salami).

In addition to the fluke entrée, we had chewy pasta triangles filled with veal, spinach, cherry tomatoes, and tangy cheese (\$18), which were sautéed in sage and brown butter—again, elevated peasant fare. Via Matta also offers ample vegetable side dishes (\$7–\$9), such as broccoli rabe with garlic and hot pepper and roasted cauliflower, and highly regarded house specials: a veal T-bone (\$34) and *bistecca alla Fiorentina* (\$42). Regional Italian wines (\$40 and under per bottle) reign.

For dessert, the caramelized quince crostada with cranberry-raisin crumble and crème fraîche (\$9) added harvest flare, while the date and hazelnut bread pudding (\$8)—more like a ricotta cheesecake

than the usual custardy sweetness—firmly ended the meal.

We left late, but a gregarious crowd still waited at the door. (The café stays open until 1 A.M.) The party, we guessed, was just beginning. ~N.P.B.

VIA MATTÀ

79 Park Plaza, Boston.

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Lunch, dinner, and café menu available.

Closed Sundays.

Reservations accepted.