

THE UNDERGROUND GOURMET

By: Robin Raisfeld & Rob Patronite

Caffe Linda is another refuge for Italian exiles hungering for good food and football scores, both delivered by owner Claudio Marini in the cozy, comfortable premises he named for his wife. Marini a Ligurian native, drifted around Manhattan's Italian restaurants before teaming up with SoHo's Pepe Rosso partners when they invaded midtown to launch a basement café' for Benetton. Eventually, he took over the operation, keeping the inexpensive panini and pasta that earned him and his cooks a repeat clientele of diamond-district workers, midtown desk jockeys, and the inevitable Italian contingent – all of whom mourned the closing of the original Caffe' Linda last summer, and rejoiced when Marini re-opened three blocks east six weeks ago.

With enough space now for a real kitchen and a full bar, an affordable all-Italian wine list, and a seldom-seen Italian beer called Menabrea, there's even more reason to celebrate. Marini has expanded his hours of operation to include dinner – a boon for late – night office workers in an area where a good alternative to fancy expense – account restaurants is as hard to find as a cab at 5 p.m. In addition to the short list of standard entrees, which includes a juicy chicken Milanese buried in a tangle of chopped arugula and tomato, the kitchen turns out daily specials like hearty lamb and rabbit stews served with mashed potatoes.

But we're partial – if not addicted – to sandwiches like grilled chicken breast with roasted peppers and pesto on a warm, crusty baguette

(lunch only), and especially the dozen or so exquisitely al dente pastas. We love the rigatoni meticulously tossed with fresh tomato, meltingly soft eggplant, and tangy ricotta salata: a rich and eggy penne carbonara; a toothsome pappardelle lightly dressed with pesto sauce; and an intensely meaty gnocchi Bolognese. But pay attention to the specials: If Marini touts the penne with Italian tuna and black olives, or spaghetti with baby clams in a garlicky white-wine sauce, by all means indulge him.

A gracious and charming host, Marini greets everyone personally and glides around the dining room, delivering dishes of complimentary bruschetta to begin the meal and sticks of Wrigley's Doublemint with the bill to end it. Not until the lunch crowd dissipates does he sit down to eat and immerse himself in *La Gazzetta*, or, as he calls it, "my Bible". The restaurant is closed on Sunday, the day Marini puts aside for the real Linda. That is, after he finishes watching Italian soccer on Channel 31, an immutable weekend routine. "After two," he tells his wife, "I'm all yours".