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Caffe Amore fails to live up to appearance

By J.J. HARDER
 Staff Writer

L'apparenza inganna. Or for those unfamiliar with the Italian language — appearances can be deceptive. And for Lincoln's Finest Italian Ristorante (a self-proclaimed moniker) the old phrase definitely holds true.

Caffe Amore, 2901 Pine Lake Road, looks simply fantastic. A cute emblem for the restaurant greets the clientele with puffy hearts and pink cursive writing. Patio tables line the sidewalk for summertime dining.

Inside, the attractive young hostess seats customers in a nicely-lit room with quality furniture in deep colors. Dean Martin is heard faintly, swooning to his fitting classic, "That's Amore." Once comfortable, the waiter brings the bread to the table, and proceeds to pour olive oil, balsamic vinegar, and grated parmesan cheese onto a tray for dipping.

Caffe Amore seems to have all the

makings of a romantic evening for Lincoln's young lovers, and one can only assume that the food would be equal to, if not above this already splendid night.

But let's not let our assumptions get the best of us.

The menu is like a little kid that always exaggerates, puffing up all of his neat toys. When it's show and tell time, he's exposed to have nothing more than a couple of broken He-Man figures.

Caffe Amore lists dish after elegant dish, but most entrees weren't too far removed from my kitchen stove. For example, the Meatball Sub was messy and undercooked, and bland tasting at that. The rest of the sandwiches are not that much different, except that *Amore* substituted a chicken patty from the nearby freezer. As for the pasta salad that accompanies the sandwiches, you may be feeling *deja vu* and accidentally think it's from the Hy-Vee Deli.

Amore really does itself in when it offers up its Chicago Style Pizza. Just because they make the dough a little

thicker does certify the pizza Chicago Style. Sure, it is deep dish, and it may be the closest thing Lincoln has to the Windy City's pie, but *Amore* has nothing on *Geno's East* or any other Chicagoland chain.

The pizza sauce, as well as the pasta's marinara sauce, is just plain weak. I can visualize the cook emptying the huge can of wholesale pasta stock into the pot. There it sits, lacking the kick of perfect flavor that every good sauce should have.

The food is what I would expect from a restaurant that charges \$5-10 a meal. But *Amore's* \$10-20 entrees talk the talk without walking the Italian walk — by doing something really fantastic with the pasta basics.

If *Amore's* owners want to see true fine Italian dining, they should make a trip to St. Louis and wait in line at *Cunetto's*. And if Nebraskans want an expensive Italian meal that's worth it — try *Pane e Vino* on West O or *Lo Selo Mio* in Omaha.

If not, *che sera, sera.*

Mid-East Restaurant serves authentic food in simple setting

J.J. HARDER
 Staff Writer

Do a cash register, a pop machine and a stove equal a restaurant? Normally, no. But for a few Iraqi entrepreneurs, that's more than enough for their own small business.

Mid-East Restaurant, 23rd & R streets, brings a no frills style of food service just a few blocks from City Campus. Mid-East adds to Lincoln's growing number of authentic ethnic restaurants, especially those of the Middle Eastern persuasion.

It's much like the nearby Arabic Restaurant and southeast Lincoln's Jerusalem Cuisine, cooking up Middle Eastern classics from the owners' own family recipes.

Mid-East doesn't look like much from the outside, located in half of a small, shoddy building with a paper "Open" sign in the window. Inside, it isn't exactly glorious, either — the decor consisting of old blue carpet and a few mirrored wall hangings.

But atmosphere isn't what you're paying for here. And only takeout is available, so you won't have to hang around to enjoy the ambiance. It's the authenticity of the food that gives this place its great character.

The menu is small, but chances are most of the items are new to you. Sure, there's falafel and gyros for the rookies and unadventurous. But if you want to actually try some food that isn't Americanized at all, then you're in for a treat.

Kuba, rice stuffing filled with meat, is seasoned just right. It's like eating the

Iraqi version of a Runza with some real spice. And for the good Nebraskan, there's Shish Kabob — grilled steak and vegetables. My favorite is tikka, perfectly seasoned ground lamb. If you can't decide what to try, go for the \$6 combination plate.

Everything else on the menu is priced at \$4.25 or less, so this dining experience won't break the bank. And each dish comes with bread that rivals the Oven's.

Don't be surprised if there aren't too many Americans around, because right now Mid-East is mostly known in the Iraqi community. But venturing into the world of true ethnic food is worth it. Stop by Mid-East Restaurant and catch a glimpse of the world outside of UNL.

But don't worry, you won't get homesick too fast — they only offer Pepsi products.

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