

CIAO BABY

204 E. Jericho Tpke.
Commack
631-543-1400

WHY: Robust Italian fare with much gimmickry.

WHEN: Lunch, Monday to Saturday, 11:30 to 3 p.m. Dinner, Monday to Thursday, 5 to 11 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 5 p.m. to midnight, Sunday, 3 to 10 p.m.

HOW MUCH: Menu changes daily; appetizers, entrees and desserts serve at least two; appetizers, \$7.95 to \$12.95; entrees, \$14.95 to \$23.95; desserts, \$5 to \$6.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS: Fully accessible.

By Joan Reminick

STAFF WRITER

FRANKIE, DINO, SAMMY and the rest of the Rat Pack would feel downright groovy at Ciao Baby, a restaurant whose early 1960s lounge-like decor and sound track ("Come Fly With Me," "Everybody Loves Somebody Sometime," "Candyman") bring the gang back to life. Here, waiters attired like wiseguys (black shirts, skinny ties) straddle vacant chairs or lean over occupied ones, telling you how to order (portions feed at least two, so share), showing you a colander filled with uncooked pasta (what, we don't know what pasta looks like?). Video screens on all four walls run silent tapes of such Italian-American-themed classics as "My Cousin Vinnie" and "Analyze This." Mama mia.

What saves Ciao Baby from being just another theme-park restaurant is its boffo Italian fare, courtesy of chef Erik Pettersen. After ordering from the daily-changing menu, you'll be presented with some



Newsday Photo / J. Michael Dombroski

Erik Rosselli, Erik Pettersen and Noah Russo of Ciao Baby

crusty Italian bread and assorted imported olives with bits of nutty Parmesan cheese in olive oil.

An appetizer of homestyle meatballs on a baguette, the whole topped with tomato sauce and fresh ricotta, proved comforting and savory. Calamari arrabiata — semolina-crusting squid sautéed with garlic and hot peppers and crowned with tomato sauce — was piquant enough, but woefully soggy. A wonderful vegetable risotto with grilled shrimp, how-

ever, was an unalloyed treat. We preferred the sprightly Gorgonzola salad, made with field greens, mangoes, walnuts, tomatoes and onions, to the disconcertingly tangy Caesar.

Oozing rich, melted mozzarella, Pettersen's manicotti with spinach and ricotta could have been proudly served by the most kitchen-savvy Italian grandmothers. The same held true for the aptly named "Grandma's old-fashioned pork sauce," tender braised pork in a robust tomato sauce generously ladled over rigatoni. It was evident, though, that the lobster ravioli with pink sauce had been made with little, if any, lobster (I tasted surimi). The ravioli, the chef later confessed in a phone conversation, was the only item that was not house-made.

But an oh-so-garlicky pasta primavera, made with lots of mushrooms, was savory and fine. A lusty version of chicken scarpriello, boneless chunks of poultry with potato, sausage, mushrooms and peppers, was redolent of lemon and garlic. And while the seared Chilean sea bass with a balsamic glaze and spinach might not have been an old-fashioned dish, most modern *nonnas* would certainly approve of it.

For dessert, ice-box cake (chocolate pudding and crumbled graham layers) was nostalgic enough but lacked chocolate depth. Opt, instead, for the rich and creamy tiramisu and an espresso.

The restaurant, which draws large weekend crowds, doesn't accept reservations, so you may want to shoot for an off-peak visit. Just don't be surprised if, days later, you find yourself singing about the moon hitting your eye like a big pizza pie. ■