

August 5, 2005

Ex-Torch duo's stars align with Stella



STAFF PHOTO BY STUART CAHILL

AL FRESCO: Patrons enjoy an outside meal at Stella in the South End.

Business is gangbusters at Stella. With its chic decor, happening bar, sidewalk terrace and affordable menu of Italian favorites, it's no surprise the city's hipperatchiks have enthusiastically embraced this new restaurant in the South End.

Stella ("star" in Italian) marks a career change for owners Evan and Candice Deluty. In 1998, the young

Stella
1525 Washington St. (South End),
Boston; 617-247-7747;
www.bostonstella.com
★ ★ ½ (out of four)

is no slouch — he's the former executive sous chef at Mistral, Teatro and Excelsior. Cassenelli's food is simple and attractive. In true Italian fashion, ingredients take center stage.

Try the delicious grilled sausages appetizer (\$10), savory bangers topped with rabe, parmesan and roasted tomato, and surrounded by a ladle of chickeny jus. The *crudo misto* (\$12) of raw tuna and salmon tossed in tart *lemoncello* vinaigrette is equally good.

Steamed mussels in white wine and olive oil (\$9) is the same recipe Deluty featured at Torch and Bistro 5 — but not as good. "It's being tweaked," admitted Deluty, who recognized me on both my visits. More crushed red-pepper flakes might help. And how about bread to soak up the rich broth?

Pastas are available in half and full sizes to enjoy by yourself or to share with a friend. Stella's *tagliatelle Bolognese* (\$9/\$17) has the sweet tomato creaminess of an authentic Bolognese, although in Bologna, they'd offer you grated cheese. *Orecchiette* (\$9/\$17) in lemongrass *creme fraiche* is summery light. The presentation — ear-shaped macaroni speckled with smoked salmon and fresh peas — couldn't be prettier.

Grilled pizza is thin-crust and crisp. Mushroom lovers surely will like the *quattro funghi* ("four mushroom," \$15) pie of shiitake, crimini and oyster mushrooms sprinkled with white truffle oil. Syrupy Pinot Nero wine reduction is a sugary counterpoint to the blue cheese tang of a gorgonzola, prosciutto and arugula pie (\$15).

Entrees aren't quite as accomplished. Lemongrass swordfish "Siciliano" (\$23) on smashed potatoes with a garnish of asparagus, capers and pickled red onion is delectably straightforward. But peppercorn-coated tuna *arrabiata* (\$25) isn't *arrabiata* ("angry-style" spicy) at all, and garlic-lemon peel *gremolata* relish is lost in sweet and sour eggplant, bell pepper, onion, basil and roasted grape caponata.

Pork Milanese (\$18) — deconstructed veal parmesan made with pork tenderloin — is homey and comforting. Grilled ribeye (\$26) is a succulent steak, but, with lemongrass herb butter and a side of *frites*, it seems more appropriate to Torch than Stella. And homemade ketchup would be a more sophisticated touch than bottled.

The wine list boasts a vino for

Dining

MAT SCHAFFER

couple opened Bistro 5 in Medford; a year later they opened Torch on Beacon Hill. At both spots, his unpretentious French fare and her congenial hosting garnered rave reviews.

But at Stella (named for their infant daughter), the Delutys assume supervisory roles and leave the cooking and management to others. Their decision is bittersweet for Boston diners, who will miss her gentle manner and his culinary expertise.

Executive chef Joseph Cassenelli



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every pocketbook and mood. An aromatic dry Francis Coppola 2004 Sofia Rose (\$29) pairs well with the swordfish but is lost in translation with the tuna. The prune and cedar accents of an '01 Ambra Carmignano (\$32) are excellent with the pork and ribeye.

Desserts (\$5) feel like afterthoughts. The cannoli shells come from Modern Pastry in the North End. Tiramisu is nondescript. Torch and Bistro 5 patrons will recognize Candice Deluty's beloved chocolate mousse, Italianized with crumbled almond biscotti.

In the early evening, Stella will remind you of the Hamptons with its picture windows, taupe walls, aubergine ceilings and ivory trim. After sunset, you're in Miami, with candlelit granite tables, Knoll chairs, framed photographs of stary universes and woven matted floor.

The restaurant has been busy since the doors opened two months ago, and the staff is still playing catch-up. They're friendly but frazzled and fall down on details — like refilling toilet paper in the men's room. If you call the week before to make a reservation, you shouldn't be stuck in the worst seats in the house by the front door.

Right now, Stella is a mob scene. The challenge for the Delutys is how to ensure it's just as crowded next March. The basics are in place. They'll figure out the rest.

Price: \$20-\$40
Hours: Daily, 5:30-11 p.m. Late-night menu until 1:30 a.m.
Bar: Full
Credit: All
Accessibility: Accessible
Parking: On street