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Tips Included: Luna owner opens second Concord eatery -- Bella Ristorante

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Listen to Abdel Redouane on the phone enthusiastically describing some of the dishes at Bella Ristorante, his 6-week-old Italian Concord restaurant, and you can almost smell the food.

"Just today, we made a pumpkin gnocchi, served with a creamy gorgonzola sauce with dried cranberries," he says in his thick Moroccan accent. "We also have a banana squash stuffed with polenta, served in the shell with fried leeks, with grilled jumbo prawns on the side."

Redouane, the owner and chef, has worked in restaurants all over the world, including Maxwell's Plum and Stars in San Francisco. His other restaurant is downtown Concord's 9-year-old Luna. His new venture is a little less formal than Luna — for starters, it doesn't have tablecloths.

Bella Ristorante, in the recently renovated Clayton Valley Shopping Center, was created with the family in mind, Redouane says. To that end, all pasta dishes for kids 12 and under are a set price of \$8.95.

The restaurant has a modern, inviting feel, with lots of cherry wood and a green and eggplant color scheme; Redouane fashioned it after one of his favorite restaurants in Rome.

"There is a different energy, it's more casual," the

owner says. "I want people to feel comfortable. We didn't want to make it too fancy."

Most main dishes are around \$15. Appetizers such as an eggplant Napoleon are usually under \$10, as are the salads; a roasted beet salad with arugula and goat cheese, drizzled with a fresh orange vinaigrette, is \$9.95.

All the food is fresh, Redouane emphasizes. That's the good news and the bad news. Diners these days are always in a rush, he says. They might not understand that the zabaglione-topped tiramisu is taking a little longer because the kitchen staff is painstakingly decorating the dessert plate with a fancy sauce. "Fresh food takes time! Just chill out and enjoy your food, deal with your problems later!"

Adding to the authenticity, two of his wait staff are fluent in Italian. The restaurant seats 45 inside, 25 on a patio outside. Bella Ristorante is at 5458 Ygnacio Valley Road. 925-524-0733.

SPEAKING OF ITALIAN: Down the road in Walnut Creek, the fabulous Rocco's Pizzeria has become even more authentic, inspired by owner Rocco Biale's recent trip to the homeland, visiting family in Savona, near Genoa. He's now offering calamari on pizza, as well as a Pizza Insalata (yep, salad on a pizza). The menu has also added whole wheat pizza and whole grain pasta on request, and a new seafood ravioli and a baked filet of sole dinner.

REMEMBER THE SEVENTIES? Those were the days when Perry's on Union Street was the singles restaurant, and the bar was constantly mobbed with the three-piece-suit crowd. Perry's is still there, but as of Monday, there's a new Perry's on San Francisco's Embarcadero, at 155 Steuart St. Perry Butler's daughter Margie and son Aldy are in charge. The menu is still fresh all-American food, with goodies such as grilled local artichokes, ahi tuna

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tacos and steak dinners, along with lots of salads and burgers. Perry's on the Embarcadero is open daily, including breakfast. Call 415-896-9155 — and leave that three-piece suit at home.

CELEBRATE VETERANS: Two local high-profile restaurants are participating in a nation-wide Veterans Appreciation program. Spenger's Fresh Fish Grotto in Berkeley and McCormick & Kuleto's Seafood Restaurant in San Francisco's Ghirardelli Square are offering all U.S. military veterans a free lunch or dinner entree on Nov. 9. Veterans who were released or discharged under conditions other than dishonorable can participate, so long as they've got military IDs.

A SAD CLOSING: I hate it when new restaurants I'm excited to visit close before I can get there. Such is the case with Mono, the much lauded hipster restaurant in Oakland's warehouse district, near Jack London Square. It received shout-outs from all the hot city publications since it opened six months ago. The husband-and-wife team were total foodies, and this restaurant was a labor of love.

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