

TruFire Kitchen and Bar

6959 Lebanon Road
Frisco, TX 75034
Phone: 214-872-3830

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By KIM HARWELL / Special Contributor

It's not often that you need a reservation at a neighborhood pizza and pasta joint where most entrees are \$15 or less. But when we arrived at TruFire Kitchen and Bar on a recent Friday night, there wasn't a spare table to be found. No problem, we thought, we'll just wait at the bar.

Good thing we did. Otherwise, I might not have been tempted to try any of the signature cocktails, handcrafted with just enough chutzpah to make you overlook their hokey names.

How hokey?

Try a Black Splash, a Svedka vodka martini spiked with sweetened strawberry purée, fresh lemon and a touch of rich balsamic vinegar. No, seriously, try one. They're delicious.

So were the other concoctions we sampled in the course of two visits, including the Gin's Up (Hendricks gin, sweetened lime juice, fresh orange and cucumber) and a Blackberry Smash (a minty mojito-style drink made with Skyy citrus vodka and fresh blackberries).

If cocktails aren't your thing, the manageable wine list, divided by price into three sections, includes 15 offerings for a reasonable \$25 a bottle or \$7.75 per glass.

(The menu also notes that wines are served in proper stemware at the ideal temperature. Indeed, the Tintara Shiraz – from the cheap column, no less – was served in a lovely thin-rimmed crystal glass at a brisk but palate-pleasing 63 degrees.) So a big thumbs-up on the drinking side. But what about the food? Is the same care shown behind the bar also found in the kitchen?

Happily, yes.

A starter of fire-roasted mussels came heaped in a cast-iron skillet, a full pound of small but tender specimens soaked in a delicate white wine-based broth perfumed with touches of saffron, fennel, basil and plenty of garlic and shallots. I only wish we had had some soft, crusty French bread to sop up the leftovers rather than the hard, Parmesan-topped toast planks provided.

One dish quickly wiped clean was the bacon-wrapped dates, stuffed with Parmesan and roasted until melded into salty, sweet, smoky spheres of eye-rolling richness. The simple, clean flavors perfectly complemented one another, evolving into a sophisticated interplay much greater than any individual ingredient.

Pizzas are of the Neapolitan style that's all the rage now, using hand-stretched dough made with imported Italian flour. The meatball pie was a testament to the power of restraint, just a few well-seasoned plugs of meat interspersed with dollops of the signature TruPizza sauce atop a cheese-slicked, cracker-crisp crust.

The prosciutto pizza, on the other hand, threw moderation aside in favor of the big, bold flavors of shaved prosciutto ham, Danish blue cheese, caramelized onions, honey and a house-made fig glaze. Again, the mingling of salty and sweet components was masterful.

Pastas round out the menu, and portions are big and hearty enough to share. The rigatoni S&S tosses the fat noodle tubes with Italian sausage, small tender shrimp, shards of prosciutto and sun-dried tomato in a lush garlic cream sauce seasoned liberally with rosemary.

TruMac is a tricked-out version of macaroni and cheese. Its al dente corkscrews are duded up with bits of applewood bacon and a spritz of truffle oil over oh-so-rich white cheddar and garlic-laced butternut cream sauce.

Desserts include a crème brûlée trio in the decidedly nontraditional flavors of blackberry-maple, butterscotch and chocolate-peanut butter. But I loved the playful goodness of the ice cream sandwich plate: Soft, chewy chocolate chip cookies serve as bookends to scoops of creamy Blue Bell vanilla. With four puck-size goodies to an order, you'll definitely want to share.

Service in the comfortable, handsomely outfitted dining room was just as attentive on a busy weekend as it was during a more relaxed weeknight follow-up. Perhaps most impressive was the concern proprietors showed when an entree went mostly uneaten. It took more than one reassurance that I was merely full, not unhappy, to dissuade management from proffering a replacement dish.

Of course, these owners have a little practice in the restaurant biz. Steve Hartnett is the founder of Cool River Cafe and a co-owner of Bob's Steak and Chop House; David Kazarian and Jay Clark are veterans of Brinker International and Pei Wei Asian Diner. With such pedigrees, you might expect TruFire to be too slick for its own good. Instead, it comes across as perfectly polished, going down just as smooth as one of those premium cocktails.