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Grato. Italian lovers are "grateful" for Grato's cuisine

by Cody Kendall / For The Star-Ledger

The folks at the Harvest Restaurant Group know how to open a new establishment. They've had a lot of experience, from the Trap Rock Restaurant and Brewing Company in Berkeley Heights to the more upscale Roots Steakhouse in Summit.

So it's no surprise that the organization's seventh restaurant, Grato in Morris Plains, is operating as smoothly as if it had been open for three years, rather than just three months. Service is amiable and well-timed, while the contemporary Italian cuisine is exactly what it is meant to be -- straightforward in both preparation and price.

Grato is to the eclectic Tabor Road Tavern next door as Harvest's Ciao in Basking Ridge is to its New American neighbor, 3 West. While it may seem counterintuitive to have two restaurants under the same ownership flanking each other, Grato manager Vincent Comunale noted that his place and Tabor Road "feed business to each other." If there's a wait at one, for instance, patrons can just walk over to the other.

Grato's mix of regal banquettes and cushy seating offers a setting combining elegance and rustic comfort, though the sound bouncing off tile floors means it can be a bit noisy when the place is full.

Executive chef John Schaefer, formerly of the inventive American Gramercy Tavern in New York, has made the transition to Italian with flair.

He presents old favorites, such as fettucine carbonara (\$15.95), along with more adventuresome fare. The grilled baby octopus (\$12.95) offered perfection with its brilliant balance of potatoes, fennel and a just-so lemon vinaigrette. My chicken liver and pancetta bruschetta (\$4.95 for two/\$12.95 per plate), on the other hand, seemed as if they met by accident; ouch! Better to try the more compatible bruschetta pairings, such as eggplant and ricotta or tomato and mozzarella.

Simple items are plated with style. The marinated shrimp, scallops and calamari (\$12.95) arrive in an artistic jumble with chives, red onion and bits of red pepper. A special of grilled figs wrapped in ham (\$9.95) gets eye appeal from a tri-color salad with Gorgonzola.

Much of the delivery is classic. Crouton-topped cioppino (\$20.95) is wall-to-wall fish, shellfish and sausage with subdued spicing. Linguine and vongole (\$16.95) could have used more in the way of its advertised accents of pancetta and chili flakes to make a more definite statement, but the overall portion of pasta and clams was generous.

If you're not in the mood for the national cuisine of New Jersey, the grilled flat iron steak (\$19.95) highlighted by salsa verde and soothing roasted potatoes is a fulfilling alternative at an excellent price.

The wine list is as much a pillar of Grato as the building's foundation. There's a lovely selection of regional Italian wines, starting at \$24 for the 2006 Fattoria Laila Verdicchio dei Castello di Jesi. Wines by the glass have a base of \$7.95, if you're in the mood for the Ca'Donini Pinot Grigio or the Torre di Luna Cabernet.

Desserts offer a range of amiable possibilities, such as a warm chocolate hazelnut torte (\$6.95) with candied orange, though the most exciting is the vanilla panna cotta (\$6.95). I never thought I'd use the words exciting and panna cotta in the same sentence, but this version made with marinated strawberries and sweet balsamic vinegar deserves that designation.

Grato means "grateful" in Italian, and that's just how you'll feel after a meal at this pleasing restaurant.

Hours: Lunch, 11:30 a.m.-4 p.m. Mon-Sats; dinner, 4-10 p.m. Mon-Thurs, 4-11 p.m. Fri-Sat, 4-9 p.m. Sundays.