

\$25 and Under | Eric Asimov

Like many other struggling actors, Santo Fazio knows the restaurant business intimately. He is not the first actor to have waited tables, tended bar, even to have cooked and managed a place. But he is probably among a select, ambitious few to have opened their own restaurants.

He and two partners opened Three of Cups in the East Village a year ago. If it's not a steady job on Broadway, at least it's someplace to appear nightly, with matinee brunches on weekends. And it puts food on the table, delicious food, especially the pizzas and roasted dishes from the wood-burning oven that holds center stage in the front dining room.

In fact, the handsome brick oven, shaped like an igloo, is the first thing you see on entering Three of Cups. It sets the medieval tone for the rest of the 72-seat restaurant, which is divided into a front bar area, a middle section of high-backed padded wooden booths, and a warm rear dining room. Whimsical touches abound: metal sconces on brick walls, fashioned to resemble torches, give off minimal light; a wallful of seltzer bottles resembles an apothecary's stores, a little altar behind the bar pays tribute to the tarot, the ancient fortune-telling cards from which the name, Three of Cups, is derived.

"It's a good card," Mr. Fazio says, with a performer's sense of timing. "It represents fertility and abundance."

The food is certainly abundant and begins with a big basket of excellent, deliciously supple home-

Three of Cups

83 First Avenue, at Fifth Street, East Village, (212) 388-0059.

Best dishes: Roasted vegetables; escarole fritters; caponata; pizzas; linguine with lemon, garlic and parsley; baked trout.

Price range: \$8 to \$20.

Credit cards: Mastercard, Visa.

Hours: 6 P.M. to 2 A.M. daily; brunch, noon to 4:30 P.M. Saturdays and Sundays.

Wheelchair accessibility: One step into entrance; steps between parts of the restaurant; restrooms very narrow.

made rosemary bread, easy to overeat, especially when dipped in olive oil.

Roasted vegetables (\$4) are a good way to start, a generous plate of peppers, onions, eggplant and zucchini charred in the oven, flavorful enough that the sweet dipping sauce is an afterthought. Roast peppers and anchovies (\$5.75), by contrast, were served right out of a refrigerator and were devoid of flavor. A special of escarole fritters (\$4.95), leaves dipped in an egg, onion and garlic batter and sautéed, was diverting and surprisingly light. Caponata (\$5.75), a chilled purée of eggplant and pine nuts, was forceful and full of garlic. Calamari (\$6.75) were prepared in an unusual way, rings charred in the oven rather than fried, and while they were very popular at my table, I found them too chewy.

Pizzas are the essence of Three of Cups, excellent thin crusts blackened on the bottom and bubbling on top. Among the best toppings were cheese-and-parsley pork sausage with onion (\$8.75 for a small pie); piquant puttanesca, with olives, anchovies and capers (\$6.75); basil-scented margherita, with mozzarella and tomato (\$6.50), and — gasp! — clam (\$7), with fresh clams and garlic. On the other hand, the allure of potato and roasted pepper pizza (\$6.75), which was highly touted by our waitress, escaped me.

While pizzas are the highlight, there are other worthy dishes, like linguine tossed in a vibrant sauce of lemon, garlic and parsley (\$8) and baked trout topped with a savory tapenade (\$12.95).

Three of Cups offers a small selection of reasonably priced beers and wines, including a luscious Aziano chianti from Ruffino for \$18. Desserts include some tired war horses like tiramisù and soggy biscotti, and are not worth it. Another type of dessert is available in the downstairs lounge, which features jazz and poetry readings. "It's very East Village," Mr. Fazio said. It may also be very East Village to play loud music in the dining room, like Queen and Rod Stewart, but it is an unpleasantly discordant note in this otherwise cloistered environment.

Despite his restaurant work, Mr. Fazio, the actor, keeps waiting and hoping. "It's a little slow out there right now," he said. Some things never change.