

Three of Cups

83 First Avenue (at 5th St.)

388-0059

Fertile Hand

By Julie Besonen

THREE OF CUPS IS A CARD IN AN ITALIAN playing deck. Swords, staffs and coins are the other suits; strange, huh? Three of Cups is also a card in a tarot deck, meaning abundance and fertility. Yet another Three of Cups means a wonderful new Italian restaurant in the East Village, with three young owners who are new at the business. Their fortunes look promising.

Near the entrance a small statuette of St. Francis of Assisi is looking out for them, poised in a crevice of the stone and mortar facade which surrounds the wood-burning oven. St. Francis, the patron saint of animals, also seems to be looking out for calves, as there is no veal on the menu.

What is on the menu is enticing yet simple, with such solid choices as gnocchi with plum tomatoes and sweet peas, baby linguini with lemon, garlic and parsley, grilled chicken marinated in olive oil, rosemary and coarse salt, and a selection of pizzas baked in St. Francis' wood-burning oven. A liberal use of almond-size slices of garlic was evident on everything we had, which we always take as a positive sign in an Italian establishment. Dracula would come nowhere near this place.

The appetizer of roasted garlic with crostini (\$4) was sweet and spreadable, the cloves served in their skins. We plucked them out as easily as a clam from its shell and smoothed the garlic over small pieces of toast. Fresh tomatoes brightened the flavor. The garlic was also good on the regular bread — warm and crunchy on the outside, like Wonder Bread on the inside. A stoppered bottle of garlic oil was provided instead of butter.

Before I go into our main courses, the spectacular, thin-crust pizza must be praised. Two of Three of Cups' owners, Santo Fazio and Leonard Todd, formerly made pizza at Two Boots and have passed on their magic touch. One recent balmy night a few of us were having drinks at a candlelit table outside, having already eaten somewhere else, with no intention or appetite to eat anything more. An umbrella shielded our eyes from the streetlights and

a couple of well-placed shrubs allowed us to pretend that we weren't sitting right on the sidewalk, which we were. Anyway, we were content with our drinks and our stories and our full stomachs. Then we smelled the pizza wafting our way. We had to have one.

The puttanesca pizza with calamata olives, anchovies and capers was exceptional—tasty and light rather than greasy and heavy. Other pizzas include chicken and escarole with roasted garlic, potato and roasted pepper, or bianco (a roasted garlic, potato and roasted pepper, or bianco (a white pie) with ricotta, mozzarella, fresh spinach and garlic. Individual pies are \$6-\$8.50 and a regular size is \$10.50-\$15.50 (for shrimp with pesto).

On another recent visit, this time sitting indoors in an equally pleasant setting, we had another fine experience. *Pollo al forno* (\$11.75), a juicy half-chicken flavored with oregano and a splash of white wine and baked in the wood-burning oven came topped with ripe plum tomatoes and thin strips of onion. A helping of roasted potatoes and garlicky

plete success.

A delightful, light summer meal is the penne with broccoli and zucchini (\$8.75), with a whisper of olive oil and those same chunks of garlic. The penne was cooked al dente and a dusting of toasted bread crumbs gave the sauce more depth.

Even though Three of Cups has only been open since January it has a lot of well-worn character and the appearance of an old neighborhood hangout, due to the good eye of Claudia Bogen, the third owner. A dealer helped her locate old wooden tables of various shapes and sizes, and she was blessed to find a beautiful wood bar that had been in a place on E. 3rd Street. Bookends to the bar are shelves made of antique leaded glass, and behind the bar is propped an arched wooden facade from a church in Connecticut. The floors are hardwood, the kitchen open, the tin ceiling art deco. A Renaissance festival-type sword hangs on one wall, and the former tenant of the space, Dizzy Chicken, bequeathed an old chandelier.

Other nice details include water served in wine glasses with blue stems, and a tiled, bejeweled floor and wainscoting in the bathroom. There's an eclectic mix of music, from techno to Brazilian pop, and the lounge downstairs has occasional live music. A smart idea is Three of Cups' delivery service, available until 1 a.m. The restaurant is open from 6 p.m. to 2 a.m. seven days a week, noon to 2 a.m. Saturdays and Sundays. At brunch there are several frittatas and eggs dishes as well as calzone and pizza, with a fixed price of \$8.95; entrees come with rosemary potatoes or grilled polenta, fruit or salad, a drink and coffee or tea. Dinner entrees are \$6.75-\$12.75.

Three of Cups is a card worth playing. They'll take your credit cards, too. ♦

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