



taste buds

chef Larry Janes

Dining out on pasta perfect

If you're anything like me and frequently order pasta when dining out, there's a good chance you've tried Mamma Mucci's pasta.

Whether you prefer the trendy Midtown Cafe in downtown Birmingham or the upscale and leisurely Cafe Bon Homme in downtown Plymouth, the pasta being heaped on the plates has the smack-of-the-lips approval from Mamma Mucci herself. Yes, there really is a Mamma Mucci.

I've got to tell you about the neat story of how Mamma Mucci discovered me. Anyone who reads this column on a regular basis probably feels like they know my momma. So, back last summer, I got this call from Vince Mucci, Mamma Mucci's son. He told me he liked the stories about my momma, then began to tell me about his. Little did we know that both families know the same folks from Wyandotte and that Uncle Cosmo's daughter used to hang around with my older sister Rosie.

To make a long story short, I was cleaning off my desk (like I try to do at least twice a year) and I came across Vince Mucci's number. I made an appointment to stop by and check out his operation and right off the top, I was floored with the cleanliness, the product quality and the fact that not only did I meet and talk to Mamma Mucci herself but also met brother Frank who is Mamma's right-hand son in charge of production. Talk about a family business!

SO YOU'RE PROBABLY saying that pasta is pasta is pasta, right? Hardly, at least with Mamma Mucci's business. Mamma learned from her momma in the small village of Montelongo, Italy, which is part of the famed Abruzzo Region. She learned how the choicest ingredients make the best pasta. A peek in the store-room showed 100-pound sacks of only high-quality semolina durum wheat flour. Most packaged pastas use a blend but not Mamma Mucci. While watching Mamma pack fresh angel hair pasta from the cutter, I noticed son Frank standing in the corner actually breaking fresh eggs into the roller machines. No powdered or bulk eggs for this operation.

What really impressed me was the fact that unlike most pasta processors who use extruder-type machines to force the dough through metal dies, Mamma Mucci uses hand processed machines that first roll the dough into sheets, then cut it, resulting in a texture that can't be beat. Needless to say, it's also the most authentic pasta available today on the market.

Now for the bad news. Seems that Mamma Mucci's pasta, which is made in the old basement Kresge Commissary in downtown Plymouth, is solely a manufacturing operation. That means that folks like you and me have to search it out in retail outlets or enjoy it in various restaurants. So far, this great pasta is available only in and around the Plymouth community.

LOOK FOR IT at the Cheese and Wine Barn, Penniman Deli and the Porterhouse Meat Market in Plymouth. Mancuso's Quality Market and the Shopping Center Market in Northville stock the stuff and last, but not least, you might be able to find it at the Food Emporium in Livonia. For the not so timid and shy, if you happen to be dining at one of Detroit's better restaurants, ask if you can purchase some.

In addition to the Midtown Cafe and Cafe Bon Homme, you will be smacking your lips on Mamma Mucci's own pasta when at the likes of Hogan's in Troy and Bloomfield Township, Italian Cucina in Plymouth, Panache in Birmingham, the famed Skyline Club in Southfield, the Double Eagle in Rochester and E.G. Nicks in West Bloomfield, not to mention about 50 other places that serve pasta, too.

Daily fare: prizeworthy meals

By Janice Brunson
staff writer

TODAY'S EXECUTIVE chef is a new breed of gourmand, a stylized expert of ambitious culinary ideals, laboring within the increasingly competitive world of country club cuisine.

Today's scene is more "selective and demanding" than ever, according to Michael Connery who, five months ago at the age of 25, was named executive chef at Bloomfield Hills Country Club.

A member of the prestigious culinary team from Michigan that in 1987 scored 13 gold medals in Olympic food competition in Germany, Connery is a rising new star on the scene, incorporating award-winning pates and poached meats into daily fare for members of the club.

"It used to be chefs went to country clubs to retire," said Connery, a 1987 graduate of the Chef de Cuisine program at Oakland Community College.

No longer, judging from Connery's creative use of fresh fruits or natural juices to spice general sauces or sugar to create uniquely flavorful "heart smart" entrees low in cholesterol and carbohydrates.

"My number one ideal is taste," he said, adding that rarified taste is the result of complementary seasoning and preparation technique.

AT AGE 51, Larry Danlot has been executive chef for six years at Western Golf Country Club in Redford Township.

While he concedes today's executive chef is a new breed of gourmand, he laughs at the notion of "retirement." The job, he said, is enormously demanding.

"Menu planning. Parties. Lunches. Dinners. You're very busy. It's very different from restaurant work. Your diners are paying dues and they expect good food and food service," Danlot said. He works 10 to 11 hours daily.

In January, Danlot and a crew of cooks, assistants and pantry girls spent a full week preparing for the club's annual evening for men, including a full complement of hot and cold hors d'oeuvres and a sit-down meal for 600 diners.

Danlot's crew also provides daily a choice of some 30 entrees, two specials and a fish catch of the day.

Danlot's cuisine ideal: "the best-quality food possible."

Robert Dalecki, executive chef at Franklin Hills Country Club as of one month ago, trained as a chef at Grosse Pointe Yacht Club and, more recently, the Lark, a gourmet restaurant in West Bloomfield.

In describing the difference between food preparation for a country club setting of buffets and large parties, and individual entrees more common at a restaurant, he speaks



Michael Connery is executive chef at the Bloomfield Hills Country Club.

STEPHEN CANTRELL/staff photographer

of "bigger production, higher volume and more kitchen staff."

"Quality can go down a little. You have to work to keep standards up to par," he said, maintaining self-imposed high standards with such delicacies as fresh sauces of chutney or salsa.

"I like current trends towards lighter cuisine," Dalecki said.

EXPERIENCE IS THE KEY to fine personalized cuisine, according to award-winning executive chef Kevin Brennan of Orchard Lake Country Club.

"When you're younger you catch ideas from different cookbooks or talking shop with peers. You run with the idea. Then, as you grow with experience and begin knowing

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Area country club chefs share some of their favorite recipes

PAELLA
Executive Chef Lon McCracken
Meadowbrook Country Club

12 cups rice
10 tablespoons chicken and clam broth
1-1/4 teaspoons saffron
Garnish
1 lobster (1-1/2 pounds) or 2 tails (6 ounces each)
1 whole chicken breast, cut into 4 pieces
4 large or 8 medium shrimp
4 mussels

8 littleneck clams
1 fish fillet or steak (8 ounces swordfish, snapper or tuna), cut into 4 pieces
4 ounces chorizo sausage
Sofrito
olive oil
1 to 1-1/4 cups diced onions
2 tablespoons minced garlic
2 tablespoons dried red pepper
1 tablespoon diced green pepper (optional)
1-1/2 cups chopped tomato, peeled and seeded

Heat stock with saffron. Do not boil. Briefly saute all garnish, except bivalves (mussels and clams), in olive oil and set aside. Saute ingredients for the sofrito in olive oil over medium heat for 2 minutes. Add rice to the sofrito and continue to saute, coating rice with oil. Add stock to rice mixture and boil approximately 4 minutes. Add garnish to the pilaf. Cover and bake at 400 degrees, approximately 20 to 25 minutes.

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Michael's works to improve its offerings

The closing of the Money Tree will impact area restaurants lucky enough to have hired away chefs and staff from the renowned eatery. One such beneficiary may be Michael's, a mid-priced restaurant in a Beverly Hills strip center most noted for being home to Border's book store.

Michael's hired a former chef and a night cook from the Money Tree as part of its own efforts at upgrading that began last summer. Since July, the menu has changed and a former popular chef, Patrick Gearin (also a onetime Money Tree chef), has returned.

By paring down the dinner menu to 10 entrees plus a

few daily specials, the restaurant will deliver dinner promptly, promises manager Charlie Laurencelle, son of the co-owner and restaurant's namesake, Michael Laurencelle.

The service is indeed fast and attentive, but Michael's could use a little more attention to food preparation if it expects to compete with similar restaurants in its price range. While the entrees sound exciting, ours tended to be overcooked and dull.

THE MEAL STARTED out well with an appetizer of "homemade" lamb sausage with grilled vegetables. The sausage was deliciously spicy, among the best we've tried. The presentation, however, was less interesting. The sausage, served in a large hamburger-like patty, was accompanied by a few slices of onion, carrots and zucchini that had been grilled dry.

On to the salads, which were very good — fresh, crisp and composed of a variety of lettuces with tomatoes, cucumbers and purple onions. Both the Dijon vinaigrette and tarragon vinaigrette dressings were excellent.

For our main entrees, we selected from several that sounded intriguing — a "strawberry" grouper with

curry sauce (\$14.95) and a dish with grilled lamb chops and shrimp (\$15.95).

The grouper turned out to be a fillet surrounded by fresh strawberries and lightly coated with a mild curry sauce. The sauce was mild and a flavorful complement to the fish, but the fish itself was overcooked to mushiness.

The grilled lamb chops were a bit overdone also and were served with a gravy-like, intense sauce. The shrimp were a disappointment. The two shrimp were topped with cheese sauce and rosemary and wrapped in phyllo — a treatment that could be terrific. Here, they were overdone and nearly flavorless.

OUR ENTREES WERE served with potatoes that had been quartered and cooked the skin and with steamed veggies. The potatoes were good, but the veggies were a bit soggy — and everything appeared to have been spooned onto the plate without much thought to presentation.

The dinner menu offers several other entrees worth mentioning — like the confit of moulard duck legs; a chicken strudel; penne tossed with fennel sausage, black olives, and peppers; and an almond chicken in which the chicken is dredged in ground almonds, sauteed and served with Dijon mustard and honey sauce.

The building itself is a very attractive setting for dining. An upper level dining balcony encircles the main floor, overlooking the bar, booths and a few tables. Artwork is arranged along the walls as in a gallery. Tables are draped in dark, paisley cloths and covered with glass.

Details: Michael's, 17600 W. 13 Mile Road, Beverly Hills. 540-4444.

Hours: Lunch: 11:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Saturday; Dinner: 5:10 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 5-11 p.m. Friday-Saturday; Brunch: 10:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. Sunday. Reservations accepted for all meals.

Prices: Lunch: \$4.50-\$6.95. Dinner: \$7.95-\$15.95. Brunch: \$9.95 adults, \$3.95 children. MasterCard, Visa, Diner's Club, Discover, American Express.

Value: Good.



Michael's is named after father of Charlie Laurencelle, shown here on balcony of restaurant in Southfield.



JERRY ZOLYNSKY/staff photographer
Pork chops (above), as well as grilled chicken and broiled salmon, are a specialty at Michael's.