

DINING

Get full-course kisses and hugs on Valentine's Day

BY ELEANOR HEALD
SPECIAL WRITER

Romance Italian style on Valentine's Day and include Kisses and Hugs. In Italian, that translates Baci Abbracci, the name of Pontiac's newest Italian restaurant with well-fused American flare.

Nino Cutraro, owner of Intermezzo in the Harmonic Park area of Detroit, opened Baci Abbracci last November. Cutraro, a native of Sicily, grew up in Rome and now makes Bloomfield Township his home.

"I like weather with four seasons," he said. "People in this area are hip and avant-garde. The metro-Detroit area is as 'in' as L.A. or New York. It's a melting pot in the heartland of America. When it comes to dining, area residents are experienced and know good food."

Cutraro owns the building housing Baci Abbracci. Longtime area residents may recall it as a bank, turned Pontiac car dealership, then Visa-Via, and until last year, the Ultra Inn Sports Bar. All trappings of any former lives are gone, except the large deck that will be appealing in warmer weather to those who like to eat outdoors.

A culinary fusion concept usually has an Asian-flavored ring, but Baci Abbracci's menu is a representative fusion of Italian and American that clicks.

And what's on the menu is similar to Intermezzo in entree offerings. Like Intermezzo, it appeals to adult diners, but the Pontiac setting is distinctly warehouse, perked up with full carpeting, well-spaced tables with white and gold cloths and glass dividers with Xs and Os accenting kisses and hugs.

Baci Abbracci
Where: 40 W. Pike St., Pontiac (248) 253-1800.

Hours: 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. and 5-10 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday; until midnight Friday; 5 p.m. to midnight Saturday; 5-9 p.m. Sunday.

Menu: Popular fusion of Italian foods with American settings in a warehouse setting designed and decorated as a modern interpretation of Italian Gothic.

Cost: Lunch average \$4-10 for appetizers, sandwiches, salads and pastas. All dinner entrees available at lunch. At dinner appetizers range \$3-13; entrees \$13-19; and pastas \$10-18.

Reservations: recommended
Credit cards: All majors accepted.

Gothic accents have a perversely sophisticated appeal, particularly in the large bar, with glass sound breakers separating it from the dining area.

Jazz and top-40 live music on Friday and Saturdays inspires patrons to dance on the terrace floor. The Ventemiglia Quartet plays now through March.

On Valentine's Evening, Saturday, Feb. 14, the large second floor banquet facility will serve as the venue for a co-sponsored WNIC buffet dinner dance beginning at 9 p.m. for \$55 per couple, cash bar. The menu includes farfalle with chicken and broccoli; rigatoni with caramelized onions, olives and marinara sauce; house salad; carved beef tenderloin with wild mushrooms and cognac sauce; salmon medallion with artichokes, capers and

lemon; potatoes Anna; vegetable garnishes; and dessert. That evening, diners can also choose from the regular menu in the main dining room, prepared by Executive Chef Brian DeMeyer. After graduating from Oakland Community College's culinary department, he spent 10 years training under Master Chef Miles Gihelka and Executive Chef Steve Allen at Southfield's Golden Mushroom.



STAFF PHOTO BY JOHN STORZBECK

Romance Italian style: Nino Cutraro, owner of Baci Abbracci, presents some specialty dishes including Osso Buco Milanese with garlic mashed potatoes, baked butternut squash with lemon glaze; broiled jumbo shrimp stuffed with saffron shrimp mousse, sea scallop saute on a bed of braised red Swiss chard risotto, and Tiramisu with Espresso Creme-Anglaise.

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Now, at age 30, he's on his own and enjoys the mix of flavors, vinegar and oil interplay and fresh ingredients required for tasty Italian dishes.

"There's a simplicity to good Italian cooking, but the flavors must be solid," he emphasized. "And texture is everything."

At lunch recently, Jeffrey Heyn owner of Planet Neon Sign and Lighting Systems in Novi tried out Baci Abbracci for the first

time with his sales rep Kevin Blake, who had been there before. Heyn liked the minimalist.

"It had great flavors and was not too spicy," he noted. He thought the Ziti con Carciofi (pasta tossed with artichokes, onions, tomatoes, fresh basil, garlic, olive oil and sprinkled with grated Romano cheese) was "garlic accented, but had good harmony with a lot of other flavors. It was light and a good choice for lunch."

Blake praised the "awesome flavors" of the Chicken Tortellini soup. "You can't pull this out of a can," he added. "The lasagna was firm and made a good layered presentation. A broccoli vegetable garnish was cooked perfectly crisp/tender."

Blake likes the warehouse concept decor. "It's the kind of place where you feel comfortable in jeans or a business suit," he added.

Both Heyn and Blake noted the service skills of their waiter Casey, and said he was friendly and knowledgeable about menu offerings, steering both of them to good choices. Checking on Casey, I learned he has been waiting tables for 12 years. When it comes to dining room servers, experience shows.

Other recommendations for Valentine's Day dining

Romantic:
■ Cafe Bon Homme, 844 Pennington, Plymouth (734) 463-6260
■ Cio's Cortina, 307115 W. 10 Mile Road, Farmington Hills (248) 474-3033
■ Emily's, 505 N. Center, Northville (248) 349-0505
■ Fleetwood on Sixth, 209 W.

6th St., Royal Oak (248) 541-8050

■ Golden Mushroom, 18100 W. 10 Mile Road, Southfield (248) 559-4230

■ Il Posto, 29110 Franklin Road, Southfield (248) 827-5070

■ Marco's, 3758 Grand River, downtown Farmington (248) 477-7777

■ Morels: A Michigan Bistro, 30100 Telegraph, Bingham Farms (248) 642-1094

■ Ocean Grille, 280 Old Woodward, Birmingham (248) 648-7001

■ Rugby Grille at The Townsend Hotel, 100 Townsend Street, Birmingham (248) 642-5999

Up tempo romantic:

■ Forté, 201 Old Woodward, Birmingham (248) 594-7300

■ Fox & Hounds, 1560 North Woodward, Bloomfield Hills (248) 644-4800

■ No. Vi Chophouse & Lobster Bar, 27790 Novi Road (in Hotel Baranette), Novi (248) 304-5210

■ Oakland Grill, 32832 Woodward Ave., Royal Oak (248) 549-7700

■ Rochester Chop House, 306 Main St., Rochester (248) 651-2266

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