

# Rustica Europa blends the best of southern Europe

BY ELEANOR HEALD  
SPECIAL WRITER

Peek over cafe window coverings into this Rochester Hills eatery. A pleasant surprise. A bit of southern Europe in both decor and menu offerings.

Since opening in December 1995 under the name Rustica Piazza, chef/proprietor Michael Thomas, Jr., has made culinary leaps. He added pastas in 1996 and served a total of six tables. By April that year, he had been discovered and was bustling at the seams. He bought the adjacent storefront, closed for six months, and re-opened three years ago as a dinner-only restaurant.

Menu items headlined in French and Italian set the expectations — a little bit of both on the compact menu that allows Thomas' small kitchen to make everything from scratch and to order.

The European, Old World and French country, relaxed atmosphere of Rustica provides a sense of comfort that's not noticed in national chain restaurants or absentee-owner eateries.

It's easy to note that 34-year-old Michael Thomas loves what he does.

"I've worked in restaurants since I was 14 years old," he said. "I started as a dishwasher, then bus boy, and rose to management before I went to culinary school."

Modest, but obviously proud of his skills, Thomas revealed that he graduated from Scottsdale Culinary Institute in Arizona, at the top of his class with a 4.0 GPA.

"For a food style, I've settled in on my southern-European family roots," he added. "Since this area did not need another traditional Italian restaurant, I chose to combine its style with southern French."

The principal menu changes

**Rustica Europa**  
Where: 877 E. Auburn (northwest corner of Auburn & John R), Rochester Hills (248) 852-0011.  
Open: Monday-Thursday 4:30-9 p.m. Friday and Saturday until 10 p.m.  
Menu: Classically-styled cuisine of southern France and northern Italy.

Cost: All regular menu main dishes under \$15.  
Reservations: For parties of five or more only.  
Credit cards: All majors accepted.  
Details: Full service bar.

**Rustica uncorked**  
Chef/proprietor Michael Thomas, Jr., knows what he likes to drink with his food and let's you in on it.  
■ Pepperoni e Salsiccia appetizer pairs perfectly with a glass of 1996 Ruffino Chianti Classico Azzano.  
■ Chicken with Pescatora Pasta, it's 1997 Clos du Bois Pinot Noir.  
■ Chicken or Veal Piccata calls for 1998 Banfi Pinot Grigio San Angelo.

with the season. Monthly specials add an additional appetizer, salad, pasta and three specialties which can range from a comfy stuffed pork loin to French country-style frog legs.

Rustica is divided into two dining options. The full-service bar side is the smoking area with 16 bar stools (where appetizers only may be ordered), five booths and two tables of eight. The non-smoking section has table seating only, accommodating a total of 36. It's here that you can experience both rustic and European.

A mid-room service table holds a large bottle of 1998 Banfi Col di Sasso Cabernet Sauvignon-Sangiovese blend. Getting a glass of this delightful red wine (\$3.95 for eight ounces) is an honor system self pour. Just tell your waitperson how many glasses were taken. Wine freshness is insured by a nitrogen system. A compact list of two dozen wines offers other options in the beverage department.

Interaction among diners in this non-smoking room is very reminiscent of a dining experience in southern Europe, with-

out the smokers Europeans tend to be.

Antipasti (Italian) is synonymous with Entrée (French) and translatable as appetizers in English. Among the most popular are Moules, farm-raised mussels steamed with white wine, garlic, and multi-color bell peppers.  
Melanzane is eggplant layered with pomodoro sauce, ricotta, mozzarella, and fontina cheese, finished with fresh basil. Pepperoni e Salsiccia has hot Italian sausage mixed with roasted peppers, onions, and tomatoes.

The signature soup is Champignon avec Champagne, made from a wine reduction that is not as heavy as many mushroom cream soups. You may find a Soup del Giorno, varying daily and offered if time to make it permits.

That's rustic and a thoroughly southern French, small family-owned restaurant expectation.

Dried pastas are imported, but flat pastas are purchased fresh from Mama Mucci in Plymouth. Your choices abound here. Pescatora includes linguini, mussels, grilled tuna, littleneck



At your service: Curt Smith (left to right), Michael Thomas Jr. (chef/proprietor), Sebastin Ponce and Andrew Sanderson present some of the items you'll find on the menu at Rustica Europa.

clams, and shrimp in a spicy tomato sauce.

Since Judy Thomas (Michael's wife) is vegetarian, so is her favorite dish, lasagna, with nine layers, two sauces, fresh spinach, and five select cheeses.

You can catch Judy at the restaurant as hostess on Saturday evenings.

Michael's mom Pat Thomas assumes that role on Fridays.

Modestly-priced house specialties, served with fresh bread, a side of pasta, and a vegetable include both a chicken and veal

Picatta (sauteed and finished with lemon-caper beurre blanc) and chicken or veal alla Fiorentina, sautéed medallions with braised spinach and wild mushroom Burgundy demi glace.

Stemming from another southern-European region is Chicken a la Portuguesa with tomatoes, mushrooms, garlic and olives, over a rice pilaf.

Bistecca is grilled strip steak served with red onion confit and draped with a merlot sauce. Scampi and Sole round out specialty seafood offerings.

There's pizza. Small at \$6 is a child pleaser along with other classic pastas with sauces kids like.

Desserts always include Tiramisu, house-made Cannoli, and Strawberries with Frangelico Cream.

Eleanor Heald is a Troy resident who writes about dining, food and wine for the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers. To leave her a voice mail message, dial (734) 953-2047 on a touch-tone phone, mailbox 1864.

## WHAT'S COOKING

Send items for consideration in What's Cooking to Keely Wygonik, Entertainment Editor, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, 36261 Schoolcraft, Livonia, MI 48150. To fax, (734) 591-7279 or e-mail, kwygonik@ee.honcom.net.

■ **Gourmet Gala** — Presented by Crittenton Hospital, 5-8 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 7, Troy Marriott, 200 W. Big Beaver Road, Troy. Tickets \$75 (friend), \$125 (patron), \$175 (benefactor), call (248) 652-5346. Event features many of the area's best chefs, restaurateurs and winners. Proceeds will go toward the purchase of a handicapped-accessible passenger bus for the Older Persons' Commission.

■ **Celebrate Beaujolais Nouveau** — at Big Rock Chop & Brew House 245 S. Eton, Birm-

ingham (248) 647-7774. Between Nov. 10 and 20 beginning at 4 p.m. daily, enjoy a four-course very French Bistro dinner. Each course accompanied by wine. The cost is \$60 per person.

Until Nov. 18, the legal first date the 1998 Georges Dubouff Beaujolais Nouveau can be poured, the substitution is the lovely 1998 Maison Louis Jadot Beaujolais Village with the grilled salmon hors d'oeuvre. Entree choices include Supreme de Volaille (breast of chicken) or Petite Filet Mignon aux Duxelles (small grilled filet stuffed with diced mushrooms) and served with a shallot and balsamic vinegar reduction. Salad is sliced smoked duck breast, chilled foie gras paté and pistachios atop mixed greens. Fresh Bartlett pear stuffed with gorgonzola and

poached in white wine rounds out offerings in the dessert category.

■ **Save A Heart, A Celebration of Wine and Food**, 6:30-9 p.m. Friday, Nov. 12 — at the Michigan League, 911 North University at Fletcher, Ann Arbor, to benefit the Michigan Congenital Heart Center at C.S. Mott Children's Hospital. Over 300 different wines will be available for tasting, accompanied by food from Ann Arbor's most popular restaurants. General admission tickets are \$50 per person (\$35 of which is tax deductible)

and Tasting from Private Cellars benefactor tickets are \$180 (\$125 tax deductible). Call (734) 936-9134.

■ **Epoch Restaurant Group's Millennium Celebration** — Guests dining at any of four Epoch restaurants (Tribute, Farmington Hills; Forté, Birmingham; Too Chezy, Novi; and Latitude, Bay Harbor) between now and Nov. 24 will receive an entry form each time they dine, or simply upon request. A random drawing on Nov. 30 will determine the winner of a six-day gastronomic package for six

beginning Dec. 28 and ending Jan. 2. The winner and guests will dine at each of Epoch's metro-area restaurants and be flown to Harbor Springs on Dec. 31 for a new year celebration.

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