

La Villa Ristorante puts diners in an Italian mood

BY ELEANOR HEALD
SPECIAL WRITER

Stepping inside a replica of an Italian villa is heartwarming any evening, but as our weather gets colder, there's even greater charm. This is the ambience greeting diners at Clarkston's La Villa Ristorante that opened mid-June this year.

Seating 118 people at booths and tables, replete with table cloths and black-tie servers, the mood is sophisticated yet comfortable.

In an ideal Clarkston location close to Pine Knob and at the heart of the Golden Mile, between Sasabaw Road and I-75 to Maybee Road, La Villa is easily accessed.

It has been suggested by some that metro-Detroit does not need another Italian restaurant. Yes, when dining surveys are made, what's in first place? Italian cuisine. However, someone at La Villa should clean up the glaring misspellings on the menu and reprint it.

Owner Don Tocco has given executive chef Zog Vulaj full rein in the kitchen to dish up tasty regional Italian specialties.

Regular diners consider three antipasti as standouts. Calamari Arrabbiata, squid dusted in seasoned flour, then deep fried to a golden brown and served with a spicy tomato sauce; a rustic, authentic Bruschetta topped with vine-ripened Roma tomatoes, pesto, and grated Romano cheese; and Shrimp Villa where jumbo gulf shrimp are lightly breaded then deep fried and served with garlic and lemon in a white wine sauce.

Minestrone is the flagship soup, but Zuppa Del Giorno can range from Pasta Fagioli to northern Tuscan bean or salt cod.

Among top pasta entrees are Lasagna Bolognese al Forno with layers of lasagna noodles baked

La Villa Ristorante

Where: 6397 Sasabaw Road, Clarkston (248) 922-1700.
Open: For dinner 5-10 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday, until 11 p.m. Friday-Saturday, 4-8 p.m. Sunday.
Menu: Regional Italian cuisine featuring veal, pasta, steaks, fresh fish, and house-made sauce.
Cost: Entrees range \$11-23 and include potato, vegetable, side of pasta, and choice of soup or salad.
Reservations: Accepted.
Credit cards: All majors accepted.
Details: Full service bar. Kid's menu: half portion at half price.

La Villa Uncorked

Here are some recommended wine and food pairings.

- 1994 Michele Chiaro Barolo with Lasagna Bolognese al Forno
- 1998 Pinot Grigio with trendy Chilean Sea Bass
- 1996 Ceretto Barberesco "Asaj" with Vitello Parmigiano

in a rich meat ragu and béchamel sauce, then topped with fresh grated Parmesan cheese. It must be the Bolognese sauce because Spaghetti alla Bolognese is also a hit.

Gnocco Sardo con Salsiccia is a twist on traditional gnocchi made from potatoes. Sardo refers to Sardinia where potatoes are not grown.

Gnocco Sardo is a semolina pasta, shaped like gnocchi and served with sautéed Italian sausage with sundried tomatoes, garlic, and shitake mushrooms. Typically called Puttanesca, at La Villa it's Spaghetti alla Puttanesca. It has traditional spicy, lively ingredients including garlic, capers, anchovy paste, crushed red pepper flakes, and Kalamata olives.

The chop house-size menu offers four or five dishes in the categories of Pesce (fish), Pollo (chicken), Vitello (veal), and Carne (meat). All are served with potato, vegetable, side of pasta and choice of soup or salad.

When inclusions are considered, the price range of \$14-23 in these categories is quite moder-

ate. Try the Chilean Sea Bass steamed in Champagne and served over potatoes, leeks, and shitake stuffed with garlic confit. Among chicken dishes, the most creative flavors are in Pollo Marsala and Pollo Piccata.

The biggest seller among veal dishes is the Vitello Parmigiano, veal scaloppini lightly breaded, sautéed and baked with tomato sauce and mozzarella cheese.

The signature veal dish is Vitello Filetto where medallions of veal tenderloin are sautéed with wild mushrooms, shallots in Madeira wine, and demi-glace. It is served with risotto Milanese and asparagus.

A dessert tray presents Dolce (desserts) which always includes house-made Tiramisu, Crème Brûlée and New York-style cheesecake, along with a special or two.

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.



BLAY PHOTO BY STEVE CANNELL

Signature dishes: Executive Chef Zog Vulaj presents some of La Villa Ristorante's signature dishes including Chilean Sea Bass, House Antipasto, lobster and saffron risotto with morel mushrooms and asparagus, Veal Tosca, grilled portabella mushroom, and Tiramisu.

WHAT'S COOKING

■ **Andiamo Italia Restaurants** — Andiamo Italia West, strolling musicians 7-10 p.m. Tuesday, Dec. 7; Median plays pop and ballads, 7:30-10:30 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 8; Thique plays light jazz 8:30 p.m. to midnight Thursday, Dec. 9; Jim Paravantes & Company, "Frasco Sinfonia Tribute," 8:30 p.m. to midnight, Friday-Saturday through December, 6676 Telegraph, Bloomfield Hills, (248) 865-9300; Strolling musicians 7-10 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 8, at Andiamo Osteria-Rochester, 401 Main St., Rochester, (248) 601-9300. The Warren Commission plays light jazz 7-10 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 8

at Andiamo Osteria-Royal Oak, on Main Street, (248) 692-9300. Mark Randisi presents Sounds of Sinatra 8-11 p.m. Thursday, Dec. 9.

■ **Holiday Tea** — At the Townsend Hotel in downtown Birmingham, 9-5 p.m. Friday, Dec. 10. Sample appetizers and sweets while shopping the silent auction for holiday gifts. Cost is \$25 per person, benefits the Women's Survival Center of Oakland County. Call (248) 336-2685.

■ **Golden Mushroom** — Is offering two New Year's Eve cele-

bration menus and seatings in two dining rooms on Friday, Dec. 31. New Year's Eve celebration, first seating begins at 5 p.m. in the main dining room, cost \$95 per person; second seating begins 6:30 p.m. in the Mushroom Cellar, cost \$90 per person. Millennium Celebration, first seating in the main dining room 10 p.m., cost \$150 per person; Mushroom Cellar first seating begins 9:15 p.m., cost \$145 per person. Call (248) 659-4230 for

more information.

■ **Millennium Celebration** — Friday, Dec. 31 at Morels, 30100 Telegraph Road, Bingham Farms. Cost is \$250 per person, plus tax and gratuity, evening dress suggested, black tie optional. Call (248) 642-1894, Ext. 3 for reservations. Menu features Ahi Tuna Carpaccio, Maine Lobster Ravioli, Pan-seared Palmetto Squab, slow-roasted prime tenderloin and Calibaut bittersweet chocolate soufflé.

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