

Giovanni's offers central-Italy spin on its dishes

BY ELEANOR HEALD
SPECIAL WRITER

Abruzzi is the mountainous province in east-central Italy. Both the Italian Apennine mountains and Adriatic Sea are major food influences for the region.

These and the cuisine of San Marino create the culinary twist at Giovanni's, a landmark Detroit family restaurant since 1968.

Proprietor Frances (Fran) Cannarsa Truant and her son Randy cherish their family restaurant traditions begun by Fran's brothers Vince and Tony. They opened the location, 50 yards from the family's home, as Giovanni's Pizzeria (a name honoring their father) in a former Detroit Italian neighborhood. Their mother Rosa Cannarsa, who died in 1995 at age 87, remained active at Giovanni's until she was 83 years old.

In 1978, Fran teamed up with Paulina Tarducci, a chef from San Marino, Italy, and changed the name to Giovanni's Ristorante. It was Tarducci's creative cooking that brought metro-Detroit attention to Giovanni's. In December 1993, a fire destroyed the original Giovanni's, but not Fran's spirit. She rebuilt the restaurant with its private home dining ambiance and reopened in July 1997. "Detroit is my city," she said. "This is why I stayed here."

On most days Fran greets her loyal clientele at lunch and dinner and introduces newcomers to the fabulous flavors of Giovanni's dishes.

Tarducci's recipes are re-created at lunch by Chef Joe Bushnell, who has worked at Giovanni's since 1984. At dinner, Schoolcraft College culinary grad Tony Polito heads the kitchen. He has worked at Giovanni's since 1990.

Their pasta dishes are

Giovanni's Ristorante

Where: 330 S. Oakwood Blvd., Detroit (313) 841-0122.

Open: Tuesday-Thursday 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.; until 10 p.m. on Friday; Saturday 4-10 p.m.

Menu: Classic dishes of central Italy.

Cost: Pastas and main dishes \$10-24.

Reservations: Recommended.

Credit cards: All major.

Details: Full liquor license. Three small banquet rooms seating 15 to 30 for private parties. Audio Italian lessons in the restrooms - what a kick!

Giovanni's Uncorked

Proprietor Randy Truant knows his Italian wines. He recommends:

■ Olindo's Special (named after Randy's late father) with 1995 Ceretto Chardonnay "La Bernardina."

■ Manzo Braciola with 1994 Bodi a Collibuono Chianti Classico Riserva

■ Veal Giovanni with 1994 Poggio Scalette "Il Carbonalione" (100 percent sangiovese)

enhanced by 74-year-old Irma Morri, who each morning makes all the fresh pasta for that day as she has for the past 20 years. Several waitstaff, including Tracie Alpert, Nelson Baker, and Shirley Magryta, have served diners for a collective 57 years. This has to be a record!

Randy Truant earned a mechanical engineering degree from Lawrence Technological University in 1992. He never worked using this education.

"I'm cut out for pasta not corporate America," he said. What Randy has brought to Giovanni's is a passion for Italian wine. His all-Italian list recently won a coveted "Wine Spectator" magazine Award of Excellence.

Among antipasti, several are favorites. Bistecca Calamari Frita, fried calamari strips with the best caper, tomato and red onions in buerre blanc sauce, this side of San Marino. Then there's the central Italy tradition Piza Bianca, thin white pizza

with fresh sliced tomatoes, olive oil, oregano and four cheeses. Raviolo di Abruzzi are dumplings filled with four cheeses and topped with lobster, red and yellow sundried tomatoes in a white wine cream sauce. It's a knockout.

While the Minestrone is excellent, for something different in an Italian soup, order Pasta Fazole.

Choices of pastas are angel hair, linguine, tagliatelle or fettuccine with four typical sauces. Where the pasta bar gets raised is the house specialty pasta dishes, all served with garlic bread, pepperonata and soup or salad.

Cappelletti Verde Pesto is meat and cheese filled round spinach ravioli topped with pesto sauce. Gnocchi di Patate Verde is home-made spinach potato dumplings topped with creamy Alfredo sauce.

My favorite is Manicotti Verde Pomodoro, thin sheets of spinach



Appetizing: Dinner Chef Tony Polito, (left to right), proprietor Randy Truant and Lunch Chef Joe Bushnell prepare Polenta Napoleon, a Giovanni's appetizer special.

pasta filled with ricotta, mozzarella and Parmesan cheese, topped with pomodoro.

Simple, delicate, al dente pasta and the great flavors of cheese and tomato make this dish elegant.

Piatti della Casa are served with garlic bread, pepperonata, soup or salad and a side of linguine. Favorites are Manzo Braciola, thinly sliced beef tenderloin rolled around prosciutto, garlic and parsley, braised in a tomato mushroom sauce; Veal alla Giovanni, medallions of veal sautéed with artichokes and white wine; and Pollo alla Francesca, boneless breast of

chicken sautéed in a mild lemon caper sauce.

My favorite over the years is Saltimbocca Romano, medallion of veal topped with a thin slice of imported prosciutto, sage and fontina cheese sautéed in a white wine sauce. This slightly salty dish, a specialty of Rome, is simply delicious.

If you leave room, dessert selections change daily. If available, order Tiramisu, made with Kahlua and brandy or the house-

made cannoli.

There are a lot of Italian restaurants in greater Detroit, but none matching culinary wizardry, atmosphere, service, cordiality and heritage as well.

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.

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