

OPINION

DaVinci's emphasizes simple, fresh Italian cuisine

BY KELLY WYGNONIK
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DaVinci's Market — the name sounds Italian, but until recently this cozy little jewel tucked inside the Hilton Novi was just another hotel restaurant trying to please everyone.

"The look is definitely Italian," said Hector Gonzalez, hotel food and beverage director. "We felt we needed to be committed to one venue. We're really focused on an Italian theme."

Gonzalez and executive chef Beat Richei of Farmington started the process of creating new menu items and training staff in October.

"It's an Italian restaurant, but there's something for everyone's taste. People come here from out of town and want whitefish, which Michigan is known for. The public still likes steaks and potatoes," said Richei, who has incorporated his heart-healthy pasta entrees, along with southern style Italian foods, into the new menu. The emphasis is on freshness and lightness. "Everything is cooked to order, nothing is pre-made," he added.

Richei received his culinary apprenticeship from a five-star hotel in Zurich and traveled through Europe, including Italy and the Far East, studying with cooks of all backgrounds. He came to the United States in 1982 and began working for Westin Hotels and Resorts. He opened the Renaissance Center's

DaVinci's Market
Where: Inside the Hilton Novi, 21111 Haggerty, (one block north of Eight Mile), (248) 349-4000.

Open: 6:30 a.m. to 11 a.m. daily for breakfast, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. lunch; 5:10 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, dinner. Brunch 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Sunday.

Menu: Emphasis on Italian cuisine. Lunch menu offers soups, salads, Italian specialties and sandwiches. Some vegetarian items.

Cost: Moderate, entrees \$9.95-\$21.95; lunch \$8.25-\$14.50; Sunday brunch \$19.95 adults, \$10.95 for children age 5-10; no charge for children under 5.

Reservations: Recommended for parties of six or more, and for Sunday brunch.

Credit cards: All majors accepted

Highlights:

■ Jazz duo performs during Sunday brunch

■ Pasta Luncheon Bar — 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. Monday-Friday. Cost \$8.95 per person.

Also inside the hotel:

The Sports Edition Lounge — Offers a variety of appetizers, soups and salads, sandwiches and pizza. It's open 3 p.m. to 12:30 a.m. Sunday-Thursday and until 1 a.m. Friday-Saturday.

On Friday a DJ spins Top 40 records and takes requests 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. Relax to the jazz sounds of Charles & Gwen Scales 8 p.m. to 1 a.m. Saturday. Admission \$7 per person on Saturday.

Westin Hotel as executive chef in 1977. Richei also served as executive chef at Detroit's Henry Ford Hospital Heart and Vascular Institute before joining the Hilton Novi in May 1997.

While Richei is busy in the kitchen preparing a sampling of dishes for me to try, Gonzalez explains that Sunday brunch is very popular, but that they're working to build the luncheon and dinner business.

A pasta luncheon bar was introduced on Feb. 26. It includes a full salad bar, freshly prepared soup, three pasta choices with three accompanying sauces, veg-

etable, warm garlic bread, soft drinks or coffee, all for \$8.95 per person. If you and a friend both decide to order the pasta bar for lunch, the cost is \$15, plus tax and gratuity.

Our server soon brings out two appetizers, crab cakes, which are offered at lunch, and Fritti di Mozzarella — fried fresh mozzarella cheese with a balsamic tomato relish — offered at dinner. The crab cakes are delicate, lightly grilled and served with a Dijon mustard sauce. The mozzarella is fried in a light tempura batter and served with a tomato relish that tastes like summer.



Taste of Italy:
Executive Chef Beat Richei (left) and Hector Gonzalez, food and beverage director, present some of the items you'll find on the menu at DaVinci's Market.

Next, the salad — Insalata Caprese. It consists simply of plum tomatoes, romaine lettuce and fresh mozzarella cheese dipped in pesto and served with a balsamic vinaigrette. It arrived beautifully garnished with purple cabbage leaves.

Looking over the pasta selections on the menu, Gonzalez recommends Tagliatelle con Salsa Mare e Monti — chicken and shrimp sautéed with fresh herbs in a light tomato broth, served over tagliatelle pasta — and Tortellini con Pomodoro Secchi, Prosciutto e Funghi — cheese tortellini tossed with sun dried tomatoes, prosciutto and port-

bello mushrooms.

Salmone al Forno con Cozze e Spinaci — broiled salmon with mussels over a bed of sautéed spinach — is my favorite dish. It's a feast for the eyes and palate. The salmon, garnished with julienne vegetables, is served on top of the spinach, which is sautéed with a little garlic and a light sauce. A few mussels placed around the plate add another delicious component to this dish.

The dinner menu also includes a broiled filet mignon, New York strip steak, veal, chicken and lamb dishes.

Gonzalez describes DaVinci's wine list as well-priced and iden-

tifiable. "We're in the process of enhancing it," he said. "We'll be offering more wines by the glass. We're finding that people only want a couple of glasses of wine with dinner. We'll also be offering half bottles of wine."

The atmosphere at DaVinci's is relaxing and cozy. White tablecloths and black napkins create a crisp look. At night the candles are lit and the overhead lights dimmed to create a more intimate dining experience.

A highlight is Sunday brunch, which features waffles, an omelet station and other breakfast items, two carved items such as ham and prime rib, a pork and chicken dish, full salad bar, fresh fruit tray, dessert table and a sundae bar.

"A lot of people come every Sunday," said Richei. "It's a good spread with a lot of variety and a nice atmosphere."



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