

Eating at Antonio's just like eating at home

BY JOANNE MALIJEWSKI
SPECIAL WRITER

When Antonio Rugiero says the food in his family's restaurant is just like what mama makes, he's not kidding.

"Most restaurants don't have a mama like mine," said Rugiero, who with his family owns Antonio's Cucina Italiana in the Halsted Plaza, Farmington Hills.

When you sit down for a taste of the central Italian cuisine, know this: Mama, also known as Rita, is lending her family's culinary traditions and heritage.

Signature dish

If you want to know immediately what that heritage is about, try Antonio's signature entree, gnocchi with "Rita" sauce, and don't count on getting a peek at the recipe. It's a secret.

This much Rugiero will say about his mother's recipe: "It is a tomato base, with a hint of cream, mushrooms and Parmesan. People love it and go crazy over it. It's the sauce that has given us a reputation."

That reputation is all about freshness, home cooking and reasonable prices.

"We aren't the kind of place where we make a computer menu everyday," Rugiero said. "We are more traditional. We don't have anything premade."

Antonio's Cucina Italiana
Where: 37646 12 Mile Road, Farmington Hills, (248) 994-4000
Open: 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday-Friday, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday, 4-11 p.m. Saturday, 1-9 p.m. Sunday
Menu: Central Italian cuisine
Cost: Entrees \$8.50 to \$16.95; Salads - small, medium, large from \$4.95 for a small Italian salad to \$14.80 for a large Caesar salad. Appetizers \$2.95 for breaded zucchini up to \$5.95 for stuffed shrimp. All major credit cards accepted, except Discover.
Reservations: Taken at least 12 hours in advance for no less than eight, and for parties no larger than 18 after 4 p.m. Friday-Saturday. Parties of more than 18 are required to use the banquet menu.
Dearborn Heights location - 26356 Ford Road, (313) 278-6000.
Open 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday, 4-11 p.m. Saturday, 1-10 p.m. Sunday.

If you want to see how the Rugiero family - father, Antonio, and sons Marco, Roberto and Antonio - make their headliner pasta, check out the pasta factory as you walk into the lobby of the Venetian-style restaurant.

Other signature entrees offered at Antonio's are the chicken Antonio and veal chop. Pan-prepared, chicken is smothered with cream sauce and topped with Provolone, and featured with a side order of Fettucine Alfredo. The 10-12 ounce veal chop is broiled and seasoned with rosemary, salt and pepper.

"The veal chop is the closest thing we find to a traditional Italian menu," Rugiero said.

Tradition is what the Rugiero family restaurants are all about. Antonio's in Farmington Hills

is designed after the Venetian Hotel in Las Vegas with a heringbone floor, stone walls, and Roman columns. The eatery has a rustic atmosphere, and also offers a banquet room.

Shortly after Antonio's mom and dad arrived in America in the early 1980s, they opened a restaurant in Dearborn Heights.

As Rugiero tells it, his father borrowed \$2,000 from his uncle, wrote up a contract on a piece of paper to buy an existing restaurant and in no time, they were in business.

"As mom and dad taught us their secret recipes and the fundamentals of running a business, we would travel back home to Italy. There we would spend time with our family and friends, always keeping in touch with

tradition," he said.

One such item discovered during one of their family trips was pizza bianca, a big seller in Italy. "We couldn't get it to go here. So, we put it in the bread basket and now they're eating it up like crazy," Rugiero said.

Natural flavors rule the kitchen at Antonio's. "Like with the veal chop, you will taste a little rosemary and the meat," Rugiero said. "You will taste the natural ingredients."

The staff of 40 - with waiters decked out in tuxedo shirts and black bow ties - is fully aware that the Rugiero patriarch will stop by, pop into the kitchen and test the recipes.

"We are not a fast food restaurant. Each meal is prepared individually when it is ordered," Rugiero said.

He is proud to tell patrons that world-famous tenor Andrea Bocelli has dined at Antonio's, and in fact, returned to make a meal of spaghetti carbonara. When you see the menu, you'll notice who the entree is now named after.

Soup

Soup at Antonio's is the same as the Rugiero boys were served as kids with mama at the stove.

Signature recipes include minestrone, which is more like the traditional Italian soup rather than puree. The chicken soup,



STAFF PHOTO BY BOB DESSLER

Signature dish: Roberto (left to right), Rita, and Antonio Rugiero present gnocchi, a specialty at their family-owned restaurant, Antonio's Cucina Italiana.

which has helped put Antonio's on the map, is an all day affair.

"We make chicken soup the old-fashioned way," Rugiero said. "It is slow-cooked."

One by one take-out order patrons make their way to the front desk and each walk away with pizza that has been voted among the top 10 in the region the past two years.

"We do it differently. The secret to a great pizza is the bread. Second it's the sauce and third, the cheese. With our pizzas, the pepperoni goes under the cheese so it cooks in the

sauce," Rugiero said.

Appetizers include fried mozzarella with sliced tomatoes, as well as polenta, which Rugiero calls the traditional Italian peasant food. Calamari, stuffed shrimp, roasted peppers, and breaded zucchini top the list.

The dessert list is pure Italian from the cannoli to the apumoni ice cream, and tiramisu.

The Rugieros are making adjustments to the wine list, adding another 20 wines to the existing menu of 12.

"Honest. This is just like eating at home," Rugiero said.

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