

DINING OUT

Maria's prepares old-style Italian specialties with amore'

BY ESTHER ALLWEISS TSCHIRHART

SPECIAL WRITER

There is no Maria at Maria's Front Room, a romantically styled restaurant in downtown Ferndale.

"There never was," said owner Buddy Orlando. "It's just a good Italian name."

His parents, Joan and Carl Orlando, were the founders, 22 years ago, of what was then called Maria's Pizzeria in Detroit's Rosedale Park neighborhood. The family restaurant at Grand River and Outer Drive became legendary for its old-style Italian specialties.

That heritage has been preserved at Maria's Front Room, so named because the "front room" of the old multi-room Maria's was where most diners requested to sit. The Ferndale restaurant, a storefront with seating for 65, is all front room.

The Orlando's, Maria's "right-hand man" Mike Beaujieu, transformed the Middle Eastern restaurant formerly at this spot. Table linens in white with red napkins dress candle-lit tables (there are three booths). Grapevines and lights are strung on wooden lattice-work screens. A nod to Buddy Orlando's previous career - rock guitarist living in California - are the musical instruments hung on stucco walls.

Menu

A Ferndale High School graduate, Orlando is delighted his destiny was this restaurant. He shares the cooking duties with Beaujieu, preparing fresh, house-made bread and all the fine Italian dining specialties that made Maria's famous.

The specialty of the house is the milk-



Popular dishes: Buddy Orlando, owner/chef of Maria's Front Room in Ferndale, stands in the dining room with Spinach Tortellini, left, and Veal Scaloppini Ala Mare, right.

fed Prosciutto veal, Orlando said. Seven treatments are offered, with Scaloppini alla Mare, including three large shrimp, the most costly entree at \$18.95. Scaloppini alla Marsala and Spinach Tortellini are popular dishes on the menu.

Chicken, pasta and pizza are also available. Weekend specials might feature veal chop with veal glace and Portobello mushrooms, or fresh salmon, swordfish, sole and sea bass.

Lunch hours were attempted but abandoned, Orlando said. The uneven customer response made staffing difficult. He also maintains that Italian food, being so heavy, is better suited to dinner. After eating lunch, "people were falling asleep at work," he claimed.

Dining at Maria's is an excellent value because of the extras, including garlic bread and choice of soup or salad. The veal and chicken entrees also include a

MARIA'S FRONT ROOM

Where: 225 W. Nine Mile Road, Ferndale, (248) 542-7379
Open: 5-10 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, and until 9 p.m. Monday

Menu: Italian dining standards, including veal, chicken, pasta, fresh fish and pizza

Prices: Dinner only, \$8.95-\$18.95
Extra: Wine made and served on premises

side dish of pasta or vegetables.

"A lot of people don't give you a full dinner, but I believe the sides should be included. I don't believe in a la carte," Orlando said.

When Maria's came to Ferndale six years ago, the family couldn't find a way to get one of the city's coveted liquor licenses. Then inspiration struck. With guidance from St. Julian's Winery in Paw Paw, Mich., Orlando became a licensed small winemaker in the basement of his restaurant - perhaps the first in the state to make and serve wine on premises. Red, white and blush are the varieties. "I figured as a microbrewery, we could let people have wine with their dinners, he said.

Orlando was married last year to Emily, who had served him his birthday dinner at Forte's in Birmingham. He's a fan of different restaurants and cuisines. Four years ago, when Orlando couldn't find Mexican food in Ferndale, he opened up Jalapeno Pete's across the street from



Specialties: Maria's Front Room dishes Spinach Tortellini, front, and Veal Scaloppini Ala Mare, rear.

Maria's. His friend Don Schultz is the manager.

At Maria's, new generations of Italian food lovers have joined the many loyal customers from Detroit. "It's unbelievable how they've followed us," Orlando said. This time, everyone sits in the front room.

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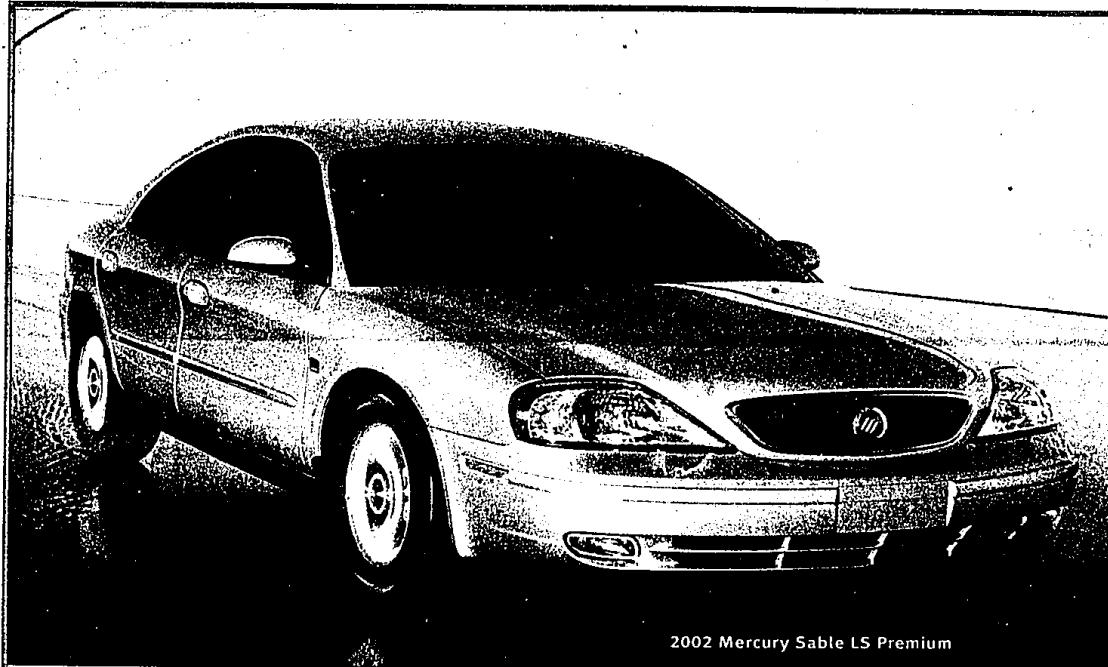
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