

DINING

Pretty Bella Ciao dishes up simply delicious fare

BY REVUE SKOGLUND
 Staff Writer
 skoglund@home.com.net
 Just when you think you've been to the most romantic restaurant in town, along comes Bella Ciao.

This intimate Ann Arbor restaurant, with the ivory satin-draped ceiling and turn-of-the-century charm, is as pretty as its food is delicious. A plate of Grilled pancetta-wrapped shrimp with lemon-sautéed spinach and soft polenta tastes so good served on a table topped with white linen and soft lighting.

Bella Ciao, says owner Jim MacDonald, is for people who know good food and good wine. The wine list is extensive, with over 70 choices from Italian reds. And then there's the American reds and the Italian and American whites — simply hundreds of varieties stocked in the restaurant's cellars.

Rustic Italian

The Scotland-born MacDonald, who spent several years cooking in Italy and France, describes Bella Ciao's menu as predominantly rustic Italian, simple fare carefully prepared and perfectly presented.

"Cooks on the whole like things very simple, things that tell the truth. We don't overwork things here."

Of course, what comes out a restaurant's kitchen is only as good as what goes in. MacDonald won't purchase what's not in sea-

Bella Ciao
 Where: 118 W. Liberty St., Ann Arbor (734) 995-2107
 Open: 5:30-10 p.m. Monday-Saturday
 Atmosphere: Romantic, intimate, a lovely little Jewel
 Menu: Rustic Italian, with less emphasis on pasta. Fish, vegetable, chicken and meat dishes. Simple but elegantly prepared cuisine.
 Cost: Moderately high to expensive.
 Reservations: Definitely
 Credit cards: All majors accepted
 Extra: Banquet room upstairs accommodates up to 40 people.

son, so diners won't find tomatoes in their salad unless the fruit has been ripened by a Michigan sun. Soon, asparagus will make its yearly debut on the menu.

At 23, Chef Jason Mase may be young to command a kitchen like Bella Ciao's, but he's passionate and imaginative — and a graduate of the prestigious Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y. He says inspiration for a new recipe may strike at any time.

"I'll be sitting somewhere, like in a bar, and I'll say, 'Oh no, I need paper and pen. I have to write this down.'"

Bella Ciao's menu is all about inspiration. There's boned chicken stuffed with spinach and caramelized onions, roast pheasant with soft polenta and porcini mushroom sauce, a double pork chop with brandy and apples, and the popular Burrida, a Genoese fisherman's stew of shrimp, scallops, mussels, clams and fish.

For me, the vegetable tart with raisins and pine nuts sound especially intriguing, as did the

roast beet salad with mixed greens.

Appetizers

Are appetizers always part of your dining experience? If so, Bella Ciao offers several: marinated mushrooms; gnocchi baked in four cheeses; a thick, center cut of smoked salmon drizzled with olive oil; and mussels steamed in white wine, tomatoes and garlic.

If you've never tried rabbit, Mase suggests you try the Maple glazed rabbit with sweet potato puree, pearl onions and toasted pine nuts. No, it doesn't taste like chicken. "It has a real delicate flavor," he said.

Mase changes seven or eight menu items a month. However, two dishes never go off the menu: Penne tossed with a house-made spicy sausage, hot peppers, pungent greens and Romano cheese and the pancetta-wrapped shrimp. (While I liked the penne and sausage, I loved the shrimp. I think it was the reduced balsamic vinegar-wine sauce that won my heart.)



STAFF PHOTO BY BILL DIZELLA

Culinary creator: Chef Jason Mase presents grilled pancetta-wrapped shrimp with lemon sautéed spinach and soft polenta and Penne pasta tossed with house-made sausage, hot peppers, pungent greens, olive oil and grated Romano cheese.

"A lot of people wouldn't be happy if we took them off the menu," said Mase.

Before she became manager, Suzanne Northway always dined

with her husband at Bella Ciao's on their anniversary. "This was our special event place," she said. "It was small, intimate and the food was always great, consistently excellent."

Dining at Bella Ciao is not inexpensive. The average dinner tab per person is \$40, said Northway. But...like a beautiful woman, there's not a Bella Ciao on every street corner.

COMMUTER EXPRESS *Brings you* **Reliable Motorcoach Service to**

CASINO WINDSOR™

DEPARTURES FROM: • Bloomfield • Farmington • Hamtramck • Madison Heights • Southfield

MONDAY - WEDNESDAY - FRIDAY

Only **\$5.00** PER PERSON
 Includes \$15.00 Food Voucher From Casino Windsor

Call **1-800-290-2957**

Service provided by Commuter Express and is not affiliated with Casino Windsor. Trademark of the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation used under license.

\$500,000
RACE TO RICHES

HELD OVER IN MARCH!

WIN YOUR SHARE OF \$20,000 A DAY THIS MONTH!

Play any amount of coins or credits on your favorite slot or video poker machine and you could be the next random winner of up to \$5,000! 20 winners daily. And it's happening every day this month. No entry tickets! No drawings!

Winners selected at random. No special reel combination required. Maximum coins not necessary. Promotion runs all day and night. MotorCity Casino reserves the right to change, cancel or modify its promotions at any time.

MOTORCITY
 casino
 Grand River & The Lodge

See the Club Metro Booth or visit www.motorcitycasino.com for a complete list of rules.

Always FREE Valet Parking and Self-Parking Without Validation!

MotorCity Casino and MotorCity Logo are trademarks of Detroit Entertainment, L.L.C. © 2001 Detroit Entertainment, L.L.C. All rights reserved.

THE DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS

Older Than King Tut's Tomb...

TREASURES from the ROYAL TOMBS of UR

February 25 - May 6, 2001

4,500-year-old royal burial sites in the Sumerian city-state of Ur (modern Iraq) held extraordinary finds, including jewelry of gold, silver and semi-precious stones from the tomb of Queen Puabi.

Don't miss this rare chance to see incredibly beautiful objects from one of the most important archaeological finds of all time!

Tickets are \$8 adults, \$5 children, DIA members free.
 Price includes an Acoustiguide audio tour and museum admission.

5200 Woodward Avenue • Detroit, MI 48202
www.dia.org • (313) 833-8499

The exhibition has been organized by the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and is sponsored by the Peter Christakis Trust. Additional support is provided from the Detroit Edison Foundation, Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs and the City of Detroit. Promotional support provided by C.A.R.E., the Children's Federation of America, the Arab-American and Children's Councils, and the American Arab Chamber of Commerce.