

New to the Hills, Antonio's offers 'real' Italian food, atmosphere

BY DIANE GALE ANDREASSI
SPECIAL WRITER

Everything at Antonio's Cucina Italiana is real Italian, from the cherub water fountain in the foyer, to mama Rita making the pastas and pupa Antonio behind the soup ladle.

It was the Rugiero family's dedication to authentic Italian recipes that impressed first-time visitors Robert and Betty Brzezinski of Novi on a recent Tuesday evening. The Farmington Hills restaurant on 12 Mile and Halsted opened April 30.

"We noticed an ad in our church paper (Our Lady of Sorrows in Farmington), and I always wanted to go to a nice Italian restaurant, and I thought I'd try it," said Robert. "It's really Italian for a change. They have items that you don't find in other Italian restaurants."

They liked seeing veal osso-buco alle verdure, a veal dish served with vegetables in its own sauce; gnocchi, tiny potato dumplings in a rich meat sauce and polenta, corn meal topped with Italian sausage and meat sauce on the menu. Will they come again?

"Absolutely," Robert said. "The prices are reasonable for what you get."

"Our reputation has always been that our prices are conservative," said Antonio Rugiero Jr., who owns the restaurant

with his three brothers, Patrick, Marco and Roberto, mother, Rita and father, Antonio.

"You can't take the kids to a family restaurant if you're going to drop \$30 a head. A family restaurant has to be a place you can bring the family."

Family is central to the success of the restaurant empire, of sorts, that Antonio Rugiero started to build in 1984. He emigrated from his home town of Calabria in Italy and lived in the south end of Dearborn.

His life would never be the same after having dinner with his uncle at Joe's Pizzeria on Dix and Vernor. Antonio learned that the restaurant was for sale. That evening he and the owner wrote up a purchase agreement on a paper place mat. A hand shake replaced lawyers and paper trails. Antonio's uncle lent him \$2,000 and the transaction was complete.

Business was slow in the beginning, Antonio Jr. said. His father would take an order, make the pizza, close the shop, deliver the pizza and return not having to worry that he missed too many orders. After some renovations, however, he changed the name of the eatery to Roman Village, which Antonio Jr. said is the oldest restaurant owned by the same proprietor in the city of Dearborn.

But, it wasn't until his mother came into the picture that the

restaurant began to earn its stellar reputation.

"My mamma, she's the chef," Antonio Jr. said. "Back home in Italy my mother's aunt used to be the head chef in the Umbria region and was well known. (His great aunt) used to cook back then in the '30s and '40s for royalty and she used to teach."

Rita, who was from Perugia, Italy, would help her aunt and, at the same time, gain invaluable experience. Rita met Antonio when she visited his restaurant and he mentioned to her brothers that he needed help in the kitchen.

Rita already had a job cooking and cleaning for the nuns at Holy Redeemer Church in Detroit, but she took on the second job. The couple fell in love and they married.

"My mother cooked for her own wedding and they had the reception at the restaurant," Antonio Jr. said.

That dedication to the family business spilled over to the couple's sons.

"I started working at the restaurant the minute I could reach the counter top," Antonio Jr. said.

There's not enough mom-and-pop operations, like Antonio's, anymore, he added.

"Everything is a franchise and corporate. The owners aren't around. We do everything the old-fashioned way. It's made

from scratch and made to order."

The restaurant has its trademark glass-encased Pasta Factory in the restaurant foyer allowing customers to watch Rita

Rugiero or another cook make the pasta daily — usually during the afternoon. The Pasta Factory can be seen at the family's other restaurants: the Roman Village on Dix and Antonio's Cucina Italiana on Ford in Dearborn Heights. Antonio also tries to hire Italian speakers for his wait staff, because it helps with taking orders from the Italian-born customers.

"I always say you can judge a good Italian restaurant by the size of the Italian clientele," Rugiero said. "We have a large clientele of Italian people come out."

Antonio's recom-

mends reservations for parties of eight or more. The restaurant is open 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday-Thursday; 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday; 4-11 p.m. Saturday, 1-9

p.m. Sunday. Peruse the menu at two Web sites: www.romanvillage.cc and www.antonios.cc. Or, call (248)994-4000 for more information.



STAFF PHOTO BY BILL BERKELEY
Time for a cappuccino: Antonio Jr. makes a cappuccino at the brass and stainless steel espresso machine. Mama Rita laughs when Roberto (at right) says that he was the one who taught his brother how to make it right.

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