

DINING OUT

Kitschy restaurant showcases southern Italian cooking

BY ELEANOR HEALD
SPECIAL WRITER

Funky, wacky and kitschy. You get this impression at the entrance. It only gets louder as you make your way down to this new basement restaurant in Birmingham's Palladium building.

That fits since "Joe's basement" is the translation of Buca di Beppo.

Buca is "basement" and beppo is slang for "buddy Joe." Who's Joe? Look for his photo. If you can't find it, a friendly waitperson will point it out.

Let me warn you. "Small" on the menu, posted on the wall, means a large portion. A "large" order is gigantic. In the Southern Italian tradition, all Buca di Beppo menu offerings arrive on family platters, in portions meant to be shared.

There's full bar service, house wines and beer. Wine lovers should check the wine list on the table for wines by the bottle. Whites run \$27 to \$50 and reds \$22 to \$90 for a bottle of Bolla Amareno. Southern Italian wines are hot right now, but there aren't many of these on the list to accompany Buca's rustic Southern Italian dishes. Too bad, because these wines are not only good but terrific bargains.

Fun
Buca di Beppo is all about fun



At your service: Buca di Beppo server David Martin explains the menu items to customers (from left), Diane Albright, Beth North, and John North.

and reasonably-priced dishes created by Corporate Executive Chef Vittorio Renda, a native of the Calabria region of Southern Italy. Renda trains chefs at each of the 72 Buca di Beppo locations, including Livonia, in 22 states and the District of Columbia. They are owned by Buca, Inc., a public company

(Nasdaq: BUCI) headquartered in Minneapolis.

"We enter to celebratory dining from baptisms, baby showers, bachelorette parties to retirement dinners. Yet, our Buca per Due (Buca for two) indicates we are conscious of couples and families with children," said operating partner and general manager

or Tim Kenrick. "Our carry-out option of one plate with a whole meal is a simple solution for a family dinner at home."

Kenrick's remarks are on target. Yet, eating at Buca is such a trip, you've got to do it; provided you're not bent on a quiet evening at a corner table. In addition to Joe and the base-

ment, humor reigns at Buca from the placemat that locates the city of Naples at the Swiss border to the Passion Pit seating six, and on to the Wine Room with its shrine to Frank Sinatra and vines and wines ceiling.

In another room there's the Pope's Table seating 16 with a Lazy Susan. The only way you can eat on the ground floor is to reserve the table for six to eight in the kitchen. If you like noise and action, you'll be in the thick of it there.

But you're hungry, and atmosphere is only one dimension. Consider Rigatoni Postano, rigatoni pasta tossed with marinara sauce, sauteed chicken, eggplant and fresh mozzarella it's a breakaway hit. Veal Limone, delicate scalloppini served over sauteed escarole and cannellini beans, topped with a smooth, but assertive lemon sauce, scores well. Buca per Due at \$23, and designed for two to three people to share, has

caught on. It marries a baked specialty (manicotti, stuffed shells, baked ravioli or cannelloni) with one of four main courses: chicken with lemon; eggplant or chicken or veal parmigiana.

If you save room, there are also seven delicious, stretch pants friendly desserts, including Torta Doppia Cioccolato, the Southern Italian version of death by chocolate.

Buca has been recognized by Bon Appetit magazine as one of America's "Best New Restaurants." It won a host of additional awards, including "Hot Concepts" from National Restaurant News and "Top for Fun" from Gourmet magazine.

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vance to today's and future performers and because these are the first programs on the chopping block when the budget ax falls" and WDET for supporting local music.

Some performers, like Matt Taplinger of Berkley-based band Halon, think having two such festivals simultaneously is overkill.

"It's really smart and says a lot about the city-ness of the local music scene when organizers can't bond together to create

two tight festivals on separate weekends, working together to make each one a successful, interesting showcase for solid local music," he said. "No, they have to be the same weekend and compete against each other."

Stephanie Angelyn Casola writes about popular music for the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers. She can be reached at (248) 625-1900 ext. 12 or send e-mail to her at scasola@oe.com.

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