

## Cucina Italiana

By John G. Sulpizio

Growing up on spaghetti and meatballs in tomato sauce, I never was much for Italian restaurants. After all, who could make a better pasta than Grandma Julia or Aunt Carm? Albeit, Patty and I tripped into a little Italian restaurant at The Corners, an intersection of Highway 121 and 128 at Lake Berryessa in Northern California. The pasta was great and we pledged to come back. However, on our next ride this wonderful restaurant had mysteriously disappeared, the victim of a building sale, so it is said.

Often riding this beautiful stretch of road, I asked around. Lo and behold, Cucina Italiana, reappeared at 4310 Knoxville Road, the location of Spanish Flat Village Center. Their new digs is a remodeled gas station with an antique exterior finish and grape vines shading the front window. Plans are in the works for a bocce court out front. The interior is a warm patina faux finish of gold with light oak furniture and table cloths with a fruit design reminding me of my Aunt Carm's kitchen wallpaper. I felt as if I was home again.



Albeit atmospheric, it's neither the location nor the décor that makes it work. It's the culinary artwork of Stephano Gusberti and his partner, Sharyn Simmons. Stephano was born in Salsomaggiore and studied at the Institute Lovate in Parma, Italy. While in culinary school he was recruited to come to America to become a chef with the Princess Cruise Line. He later worked at world class restaurants in Los Angeles and San Francisco. Sharyn is from Sonoma and after their meeting in Cotati, Stephano and Sharyn moved to Lake Berryessa in the Fall of 2001 and brought big city cuisine without pretense to the back roads of Northern California.



I hit their door after a morning's ride just as they were opening on a Sunday. My appetite was working overtime. Stephano and Sharyn greeted me cordially. Sharon warms the entire dining room with her zeal for their gastronomic mission, while Stephano reigns supreme as King of the kitchen. I love his Italianized English, which reminded me of my Grandmother's friends at the Abruzzesi Club in my hometown.

I scanned their menu and realized this was going to be difficult. While deliberating over my choices, I dipped fresh bread into a whipped blend of reduced balsamic vinegar and olive oil. Stephano's balsamic dip is unparalleled in taste. With my cup of black coffee, I

could have made a meal of it. The appetizers included antipasto, zuppa del giorno (soup of the day), and three choices of insalata (salad). I opted for insalata di cesare, a traditional Caesar salad with an incomparable flavor.

Entrees offered an array of pastas, cappellini, vegetariana, linguine, gnocchi pesto, fettuccine, and spaghetti. Steaks, chops, seafood, veal and eggplant entrees are also available with prices ranging from \$8.95 to \$19.95. I chose the Spaghetti alla Carbonara, pasta tossed with a buttery Parmesan cheese sauce flavored with bacon, egg yolk and cracked pepper. For me it was a distinct and pleasant departure in taste from the red tomato sauce that I knew in my youth. The portion was ample and I ate it all with an unexplainable and unabashed basic instinct. People who love to eat will know what I mean.



Dolce (desserts) included dolce del giorno, sweets of the day, which was a homemade vanilla ice cream with blueberries. Tiramisu, lady fingers with espresso, marscapone cheese, whipped cream and cocoa, was the second choice. I went for the ice cream, a perfect cap to a great meal.



So, there I sat in my snug riding pants, a full two hours after I walked into the door of Cucina Italiana, feeling quite satisfied that I had just consumed one of the best meals that life was to offer. Stephano seemed pleased that I was so satisfied, as if he had accomplished his given assignment in life. I sipped my coffee, reluctant to leave and bring this joyful moment in life to an end. Hence, I write to extend the moment and offer you an unequivocal recommendation to dine at the Italian Kitchen.

Sharyn and Stehphano are there to greet you on Wednesdays through Fridays, 5 to 9 PM, and Saturdays and Sundays from 11.30 AM to 9 PM. 4310 Knoxville Road is off of Route 128 in the Lake Berryessa region or call at 707-966-CHEF. You won't be disappointed with this restaurant.

Eat well. Ride safe.