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ST. LOUIS COMMERCE MAGAZINE

JULY/AUGUST 2009 - ISSUE NO. 4

FRANK PAPA'S RISTORANTE

by Linda F. Jarrett

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Growing up in a cooking family, Frank Papa knew his destiny would be in the kitchen, and so it was that on April 27, 1994, Frank Papa's Ristorante came to life.

Papa and wife Diane have created a charming hideaway on Brentwood Boulevard. Twinkling white lights and twining ivy create the look of an intimate garden, inviting diners to come in, enjoy a glass of wine and relax.

The dining rooms are spacious enough so as not to hear the neighbors' conversations, but cozy enough to allow for an intimate dinner—not an easy feat.

Fans of Northern, Central and Southern Italian food will not be disappointed at the wide variety of offerings on the menu.

Papa's grandparents, Salvatore and Genevieve Papa, owned a restaurant, Papa's, in Baden, and the family would gather every Sunday to cook.

"We'd make our own sausage, and it was our family day," Papa says. "There would be at least 20 of us gathering to cook and eat."

After attending Johnson & Wales University and getting an Associates Degree in Culinary Arts, Papa worked his way "back to St. Louis," as he says.

What followed was a succession of 17 jobs, and at each one, he gained a little more knowledge and experience.

"Once I learned everything I could possibly learn, I would leave and go to something else," he says. "I learned everyone's job, and once I did that, it was time to leave. I planned to have my own restaurant before I was 30 and I did."

Along the way, he married Diane, a travel agent, who made the transition from travel to food.

"She was pretty much thrown into the business and has done an outstanding job of



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managing and running the restaurant along with me," Papa says.

Along the way, they had two sons, Frankie, 16, and Tony, 13.

"It's a whole family gig," Papa laughs.

He says while every kitchen is "basically the same prep method," some are far more organized. "That's the biggest difference. The most organized restaurant I was ever in was Anthony's. You want it organized and disciplined, but still fun."

While some restaurants have a few selections of appetizers, salads, and entrees that change seasonally, Papa's menu is so extensive he does not feel the need to change out the offerings except for daily specials.

"We have such a big menu, but basically what the customer asks for, we do," Papa says. "We will substitute items if they ask. Sometimes, if I think things are getting old or stale, we'll take it out and replace it. It's just so rare that we do that, that when I do replace a dinner, some customers will ask for it."

Papa's is more than accommodating on that front. On a recent dinner, I asked for the vitello alla Milanese, which is breaded veal scaloppini, pan fried in extra virgin olive oil and served with lemon, but I wanted flash-fried artichokes also. No problem.

The "biggest seller" according to Papa is the Linguini Con Pesce, linguini with succulent scallops, shrimp and calamari in a garlic white wine sauce with a bit of crushed red pepper.

"We get fresh fish like the salmon, swordfish and mussels daily," Papa says. "I find out what is fresh and that's what I get."

Fish is not the only daily special he looks for. The Pappardelle Del Notte features "select wild game," which could be pheasant, quail, duck, boar or elk, each of which makes for a different, yet interesting and tasteful dish.

Another pasta favorite, the Penne Amatriciana, combines pancetta bacon, Italian sausage, and pasta in a spicy marinara.

For beef lovers, the Filetto Monte Carlo topped with a creamy herb butter will send them out the door with a smile on their faces.

No visit to Frank Papa's would be complete without their house specialty—a flash-fried escarole appetizer—crispy greens sprinkled with fresh parmigiana cheese.

Leaving room for a dessert, even to share, is a good idea. The Cassata would be a perfect ending—a triple layer dessert consisting of alternate layers of vanilla and chocolate sponge cake with a rum and Kahlua custard filling and a sweet ricotta filling. The creation is topped with shaved chocolate and cinnamon. Almost too perfect.

Frank Papa's also serves lunch, and one of the most popular items is the grilled salmon served on mixed greens with sliced cucumber, egg, tomato, and Bermuda onion topped with a tangy dill vinaigrette.

With all his cooking experience, coming up with new recipes or reinventing old ones does not pose a problem for Papa. He likes cooking shows and he has over 300 cookbooks which he reads like most read best sellers.

"I'm always like 'bring it on!' I like new stuff, I like to play. Otherwise, you're just recreating the same old thing," he says. "Sometimes I'll experiment, but I've been cooking over 30 years so I know what works. A lot of times I won't try something. Like I was watching Bobby Flay the other day, and he put bacon grease in crème Brule. I'm thinking, 'No kidding!'"

Frank Papa's also caters for special events. If you are looking for "a little taste of Italy," Frank Papa's more than delivers.



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