

Gourmet Café – Italian Bistro’s Homemade Touch

Wednesday, January 2, 2008

BY CARL BARBATI
PTW EATS (PARSIPPANY THIS WEEK)
STAFF WRITER

PARSIPPANY – Over the past 25 years, Matthew Pierone had worked as a chef at the Rainbow Room, The Plaza and even Gracie Mansion in New York, not to mention the Grand Café in Morristown and Highlawn Pavilion in West Orange.

He’d worked at other fine restaurants, as well, and as executive chef at a posh country club.

But, just a few weeks ago, he was faced with a real challenge.

His daughter had become a vegetarian, and Christmas dinner was approaching.

“I played around in the kitchen a little bit and come up with vegetable lasagna,” he said. After all these years in restaurants, you think you know what you’re doing until you have to make something special for your daughter.”



STAFF PHOTO BY KAREN FUCITO

Owner-chef Matthew Pierone, in his kitchen at The Gourmet Café in Parsippany, holds a plate of fresh fish waiting to be cooked and served. On the dish: salmon, sole, tilapia. Each is prepared with a different wine sauce.

The dish turned out to be delicious. So much so that Pierone immediately penciled it in as a dinner special at the restaurant he’s owned for the past six months, Gourmet Café.

The veggie lasagna is not on the menu at this moment, but who knows what this guy’s coming up with as his specials for today or tomorrow?

Pierone had taken over what used to be a breakfast-lunch spot in a little strip mall on Route 46 and turned it into a very special place for Italian food in Morris County.

Having been such an accomplished chef for decades, he took everything he knew and everything he loved about food and turned it into a menu that is both traditional and creative, both old school and cutting edge.

“You learn as you go.” The maestro said. “I started learning as a busboy and a waiter. I went to culinary school, and I also got a degree in business. I think everything was leading me toward this, toward owning my own restaurant.”

When he’s not in the kitchen, Pierone might be found at the computer, typing and printing out the day’s lunch specials and that night’s dinner specials

Or, he might be out buying ingredients.

“I don’t buy things by the case and have them shipped in,” he said. “I go to the market every day. I buy everything fresh, and I only buy enough that I need for that night.”

Since he’s only owned the place six months, Pierone is still settling in, but he’s already cultivated a steady core of regular customers who appreciate the always-fresh approach and the occasional out-of-left-field dish.

At lunch, there’s the always special soup of the day and an impressive list of gourmet sandwiches, from blackened chicken to smoked peppercorn turkey breast, and from grilled vegetables to honey maple ham and brie.

Salads are a big part of the lunch menu, too, and range from a tri-colored or Arugula blend to a shrimp salad over broccoli or grilled steak over mixed greens.

A dozen pasta dishes and a roster of “Business Luncheon Specials” like Herb Crusted Salmon and all sorts of chicken and veal round out the daylight visit, when Gourmet Café looks like a nice little discovery as a new lunch favorite.

After dark, Pierone turns the lights down low and makes it a white tablecloth affair, offering both the classics, like Shrimp Scampi and Veal Marsala, and the unusual, like his own unique versions of Parmesan Crusted Chicken, Pork Chop Giambotta or Veal Chop Saltimbocca, a

rarely seen version with spinach, prosciutto and cheese all stuffed into the chop and served with a fresh sage and Madeira wine sauce.

Gourmet Café

Where: 136 Baldwin Road, Parsippany

Phone: (973) 316-0088

Hours: Lunch, Monday-Friday, 11:30 a.m.-3 p.m.; dinner, Monday-Thursday, 5-9 p.m., Friday-Saturday, 5-10 p.m.

Cuisine: Italian bistro.

Liquor: BYO.

Payment: All major credit cards accepted.

Price range: Lunch sandwiches, \$7.95-\$9.95; pasta, \$8.95-\$11.95; specials and combos, \$7.95-\$12.95. Dinner appetizers, \$7.95-\$9.95; salad, \$5.95-\$8.95; pasta, \$13.95-\$19.95; entrees, \$15.95-\$25.95.

Reservations: Yes.

Dress: Casual.

The scene: A sophisticated setting is only the beginning. It's the food that's the true star here, from the classic Italian dishes to the new school takes on Italian specialties. It's a night-and-day contrast from the local business types at lunch to the hip set and the food fans at dinner.

Atmosphere: An easily ignored exterior in a bland strip mall only heightens the element of surprise when guests enter the lovely white-tablecloth interior. Bright by day, darker as evening descends. At either time, great food prepared with care and pride await.

Parking: Huge lot.

Owner: Matthew Pierone

Web: njgourmetcafe.com