

SUBURBS Dapper dining

by Charles P. Pecoraro

For 25 years, La Strada has been a hidden treasure of dignified Italian dining in downtown Chicago. Ensnared in a North Michigan Avenue high-rise, it lacks visibility, but isn't lacking in finesse or a following. It's out of sight, but never out of mind of diners who have become accustomed to its poise, polish and pollo Bolognese.

Now La Strada has been "exposed" with the second coming in October of a chic suburban version in Hoffman Estates. And judging from the initial reaction of the cognoscenti and curious, a culinary star, as in potential three-star rating, is born.

Attired in trim suits, designer ensembles or jeans, they come from the surrounding 'burbs to see, be seen and indulge in a dining experience arguably unrivaled, 30 miles northwest of the Mag Mile.

The man with the plan here is Michael Mormando, who acquired a parcel of prime real estate just off Barrington Road and built this place from the ground up. Dapper both inside and out, his dream-dining house stands, brick for brick, as a model modern Italian ristorante.

The stylish, spacious (310 seats) interior resonates with clean lines, crisp angles, square and oval fixtures, and a swath of black and tan. Off the entrance is a showcase displaying steaks and seafood for retail purchase. The lounge features weekend karaoke and DJ. An outdoor patio overlooking the landscape awaits the arrival of spring.

The menu is authored and executed with craftsmanship by chief chef John Krickl, who held the same position at the downtown La Strada and was food director of Northwestern University before rejoining Mormando's team. His staff numbers 25 cooks, an indication of the action this kitchen does

on an average noon and night.

Krickl's card abounds with familiar and innovative regional Italian dishes plus American standard steaks, chops and seafood. Several of the

La Strada

- **WHERE:** 2380 Lakewood, at Barrington Rd., Hoffman Estates.
- **HOURS:** Lunch and dinner daily.
- **HOW MUCH:** Entrees with salad \$9.95-\$42.95, appetizers, salads, sides and sweets \$3.95-\$14.95. Pizza \$8.95-\$11.95. Children's menu \$5.95-\$10.95. All charge cards taken.
- **BANQUETS:** For up to 160.
- **TIDBITS:** Carryouts and catering. Abundant parking, plus gratis valet. No smoking.
- **RESERVATIONS:** Recommended on weekends.
- **CONTACT:** 847-765-1700 or www.lastradaristorante.com.

pastas are made in-house, all come out perfectly al dente. Everything is prepared from scratch with undeniable freshness.

La Strada sets an example of how children should be treated in a restaurant. Kids are catered to with an 18-item menu ranging from pasta and burgers to steaks and ribs, each including ice

cream and unlimited, self-serve beverages.

For Mom and Pop, the appetizers are an overture to food vibes that stir the senses. Savory and sharable is Tuscan fried crab cake, with the lump meat vitalized by discreet dashes of seasoning and pesto mayo. Grilled portobello mushroom benefits from fontina cheese and thyme-scented wine sauce.

Normally, a good steak should succeed without any embellishments. An exception here is the barrel-cut filet mignon crowned with Gorgonzola. The flawlessly grilled hunk of corn-fed, wet-aged beef is so tender it literally melts in your mouth, while the bleu cheese topping elevates the flavor to a heavenly level.

Pasta ranges from so-so to so good in the linguini del golfo marechiaro, a tasty tangle of clams, calamari, mussels and noodles in tomato sauce spiked with brandy. A trio of risotti — primavera, Milanese and frutta di mare — has rice tasting ever so nice.

Desserts fit into the same refined cachet as the rest of the presentation. Example: fresh seasonal berries stimulated with tangy balsamic sauce. In the creme brulee, the rich custard and caramelized brown sugar crust approach perfection. The 90-label, 70 percent Italian wine book is a reliable read.

Service also helps distance La Strada from the competition. Directed by general manager Brandon Chick and including waitresses like Dena Ianello, the finely tuned staff is alert, attentive and articulate. For peak efficiency, runners are used to bring the food and drinks, so the servers can concentrate on taking care of the customers.



Our mission, which springs from our family tradition, is to provide our customers with bakery products of the highest quality combined with a superior standard of service.

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