

# Chef likes to 'mix it up a bit' at Via Roma

## COUNTER CULTURE

By Allen Pierleoni

“**W**here’s the smell of Italian cooking?” lunch pal Anne asked when we walked into the rather plain dining room of the 4-month-old Via Roma.

Well, maybe the kitchen is well-vented and the rich odors of baking pizzas and bubbling, garlic-rich sauces don’t reach customers’ noses. Too bad.

We grabbed a table and looked around: exposed ductwork in the ceiling, an eight-stool wine bar, a plasma TV tuned to a wrestling match, framed artwork (the dominant piece is for a Napa Valley cabernet), seven wall-mounted racks of wine bottles.

“Tablecloths and candles would be a nice touch,” Anne suggested.

At this early stage of the family-run business, I’m guessing the dining room is still a work in progress, but here’s a suggestion: Lose the distracting opera music and invest in some new CDs.

Via Roma hides in the lonely outpost of a new Rocklin mall, the Sunset West Shopping Center, a mostly untenanted landscape not far from neighborhoods of new tract houses.

Inevitably, the mall will fill and catch up with the shopping needs of all those homeowners. Meanwhile, the restaurant is attracting diners by word of mouth, said Mario Guerrero, who runs it with his wife, Trisha.

Guerrera has an impressive résumé, reflected in the fine dishes coming from his kitchen. As a teenager, he learned the basics while working at Roma II, the Italian restaurant run by his mom, Maria Guerrero. Later, he graduated from La Scuola Internazionale

di Cucina Italiana, a culinary school in Parma, Italy, and then interned at the four-star Masque Ristorante in El Dorado Hills.

But back to the food: Nice touches on the table include freshly ground peppercorns in the pepper shaker, kosher salt in the salt shaker, and high-end house-grated goat’s cheese in the cheese shaker. Unfortunately, the tap water was nearly undrinkable, perhaps linked to a nearby construction project, a not uncommon connection.

We nibbled on slices of surprisingly bland foccacia bread, enlivened with dunks in the obligatory dish of olive oil and balsamic vinegar.

Things improved with the antipasti plate (\$10), thinly sliced capicola, prosciutto and Tuscan salami, along with lupin beans, green olives, chunks of Parmigiano-Reggiano drizzled with honey (an interesting combination), fig jam, and fresh fennel and

sorrel. The appetizer was a welcome medley of flavors and textures.

Next were two pasta dishes – beef ravioli in tomato sauce, and rigatoni topped with sausage ragu (\$8 each). Both were delicious, the pasta perfectly al dente, the meals served steaming hot.

The ravioli are fashioned from house-made pasta dough, Guerrero told me on the phone later. The other pastas on the menu are imported from the Rummo company in Italy and carried at Corti Bros. market.

The first-class tomato sauce on the ravioli was luscious and silken, light-years from the acidic red stuff so often found at Italian restaurants. On a whim, I asked the kitchen to mix in a dollop of basil pesto sauce, which worked just fine. I liked the sausage ragu a lot, too, though Anne thought it was oily.

A thin-crust quattro stagioni (“the four seasons”) pizza was

next, with crisp pancetta, artichokes, cheese and Italian green olives (\$10). The pie was delicious, with a crisp, yeasty crust and quality mozzarella. However, the olives were whole and unpitted, a practice nobody I later talked with had ever heard of or seen.

Guerrera described his style of cooking as “rustic Italian from the region of Puglia, where my family is from. I combined what I learned in school and at Masque and mixed it up a little bit.”

Given Guerrero’s background, we thought the Via Roma menu somewhat tame, though specials such as chicken picatta and pork Marsala do show up. It’s a good bet the restaurant will become the top destination for Italian food in Rocklin – especially if the chef shows off his repertoire.

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*The Bee’s Allen Pierleoni can be reached at (916) 321-1128 or [apierleoni@sacbee.com](mailto:apierleoni@sacbee.com).*