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Dining

Diner: Review: Mama Vita

Loveland spot loves the carbs, and so will you

BY Michael Schiaparelli | Posted 10/31/2007

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First impressions can be deceiving. Mama Vita's Ristorante Italiano, for instance, first appears to be just another neighborhood Italian joint.

You see, Mama doesn't try to awe her patrons with gilded cherubs and ornate fixtures like some Michelin three-star wonder in Monte Carlo. No, she opts for vaguely Etruscan sponge-painted walls and a large, framed poster of a monkey drinking *anissette*.

And Mama doesn't use 21st-century scientific techniques -- foams, edible papers, "spherifications" -- in her cooking. In fact, one might infer from the menu of pastas and pizzas that she's oblivious to most recent advances in nutritional science. The dishes here occasionally feature original flavor combinations, but the kitchen zealously incorporates butter, oil, cheese, cream and carbohydrates into each recipe to amp up those flavors.



Mama Vita's Risoranté Italiano

For instance, garlic-stuffed artichoke hearts (\$7) are old school; my lovely wife joked that they should come with a straw so you can ingest every drop of the accompanying pool of green-gold garlic butter sprinkled with dried parsley. I suspect that even a tiny portion of this dish far exceeds the RDA for cholesterol and fat ... but who cares? It's as richly satisfying as anything I've eaten this year.



Another appetizer, Torino Bruschetta (\$6), surpasses similar dishes served at every Italian restaurant in America. Toasted slices of French bread are loaded with surprisingly flavorful diced tomatoes, garlic, olive oil and basil. Even though we're at the tail end of tomato season, Mama's version showcases the wonders of summer and leaves us satiated until next year.

Tonight it's half-price wine night, so we order the 2004 Gabbiano Chianti *Riserva* (normally \$28/sale price \$14), which has enough acidity to partner well with rich pastas and cheesy pizzas. Even at full price, it's a bargain, retailing in the upper teens.

We're already feeling full from appetizers when our harried but professional waitress brings a house salad (included with dinner) and a bowl of steaming Minestrone soup (\$3.59), which is good, though the base is more meaty than the tomato-y versions we prefer.

Soon, we're redistributing the plates littering our table, making room for the entrees. It's clear that we've significantly over-ordered. I have Jambalasta (\$17), which is about a pound of fettuccine, loaded with mildly spicy Cajun chicken and smoked ham and smothered in a creamy Cajun Alfredo sauce. It's great, but I barely finish a third of it before requesting a to-go container.

Working through her hearty slice of meat lasagna (\$15) -- served, incidentally, with four slices of toasted French bread drenched in that garlic butter sauce -- my third-grade daughter correctly suggests that this would be a good place to eat before running a marathon. Carbo-loading almost can't be avoided -- every dish comes with garlic toast and mounds of pasta ... or is a pizza.

We choose to have two "specialty" preparations on one pie -- Greek Shepherds' Pie (gyro meat, tomato sauce, mushrooms, black olives, pickled banana peppers and feta) on one side and Pesto Pizza (a nutty basil and garlic sauce topped with mushrooms, black olives and artichoke hearts along with more feta) on the other. Both are quite good and very original, though other options seem even crazier -- and more loaded with carbs -- like the Mac-and-Cheese or Garlic Mashed Potato pizzas. Pizzas range from \$14 for a 14-inch Cajun pepperoni pie to \$21 for the 16-inch topped with shellfish.

Now, in fairness, the menu states that most pasta dishes can be served with broccoli or mixed vegetables instead of the more carb-heavy fare, though this is an option few are likely to exercise. In addition, several "low-carb" dishes are included on the menu, but they seem like grudging concessions to contemporary tastes -- Crab-Stuffed Tomatoes (\$8), Turkey or Roast Beef "Atkins" Roll-Ups (\$9.50) and mixed vegetables sauteed in marinara sauce (\$10). Far more consistent with the kitchen's idiom is Baked Manicotti (\$14), superfluously served on a bed of spaghetti.

To end our meal, we share a single Cannoli (\$2.99), stuffed with lusciously sweet house-made filling and sprinkled with chunky chocolate chips. We are beyond satiated. We all feel like Monty Python's Mr. Creosote just before he's offered "a wafer-thin mint" to complete his meal.

Mama Vita's doesn't aspire to the rarefied level of "internationally venerated destination dining," but it consistently delivers fairly-priced dishes loaded with flavor and richness beyond what's available at most neighborhood joints. So if you're hungry for a huge portion of damn good pasta loaded with cream, butter, olive oil and garlic, this is your place. And if you want a well-made pizza that's considerably more creative than your local Domino's serves up, Mama's is worth the drive.

In fact, once my heart stops complaining and my arteries clear, maybe I'll see you there. I'll be at the booth under that

poster of a drunken monkey with a sweet tooth, pretending to get ready to run a marathon. ©

Mama Vita's Ristorante Italiano

Go: 6405 Branch-Hill Guinea Road, Loveland

Call: 513-697-9705

Hours: 4:30-9 p.m. Monday-Thursday; 4:30-9:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Closed Sunday

Prices: \$14-\$21

Payment: All major credit cards

Red Meat Alternatives: Plenty of salads, pasta and pizza dishes featuring seafood, chicken and vegetables

Accessibility: Fully accessible

Grade: A-