

diablos



Pizza Antica

An authentic pizzeria offers sophisticated dining and a casual family atmosphere

IT'S 11 A.M. on a Saturday, half an hour before Pizza Antica opens for lunch. Six servers, clad in the restaurant's uniform of black T-shirt, blue jeans, and ankle-length white apron, are gathered at the bar. They've assembled for lineup, the waitstaff meetings typically reserved for white-tablecloth restaurants. At Pizza Antica, lineup isn't a lecture; it's more of a quiz show. Standing before the service crew of hip local college students, General Manager Robert Smith singles out each server for the daily game of menu trivia. "Dominic, tell us about the kurobuta pork osso buco." "Tim, what does panna cotta mean? Which dessert wine pairs well with it?"

When the round is over, moms and dads, accompanied by hungry kids gripping toys and sippy cups, will fill the wooden chairs and tables, and children

will clang their forks against the sturdy yellow china. You might wonder why the waiters bother to bone up on the menu, but ask your server about any of the 50 wines on the wine list or exactly how the salami in the chopped salad was cured, and the articulate, exhaustive answer reveals a restaurant that doesn't condescend to its diners, even when those diners have tablemates under the age of five.

"It looks like Chuck E. Cheese's," says executive chef and co-owner Gordon Drysdale, surveying the many families seated in the restaurant. But when Drysdale and his partners, Brannin Beal and Tim Stannard, opened Pizza Antica almost two years ago, they knew that Lamorinda's affluent, educated, ex-urban residents needed a place where they could get sophisticated food and professional service—and



at a glance

WHAT MAKES IT SPECIAL: Relaxed, convivial atmosphere coupled with creative dishes and out-of-the-ordinary service.

THE SPACE: The airy dining room is flanked by an open kitchen. Striking black-and-white photographs of the local landscape add visual interest without clutter.

WHEN TO GO: Early lunch with Great Aunt Lucinda; after a day at the park with the kids; or for a lively midweek birthday dinner. If you're single, after 8 p.m. No reservations.

BONUS: Seasonal specials such as the fresh heirloom tomato plate, and sweet corn and bacon on top of pizza. This fall, look out for pear and Mt. Tam Camembert pizza.

DON'T MISS: Drysdale's brussels sprouts salad, of Gordon's House of Fine Eats fame.



not be looked at sideways for bringing their kids along. Drysdale brings his food expertise from Gordon's House of Fine Eats, a popular San Francisco spot turned dot-com casualty.

The fine dining with family concept has been hugely successful in Lafayette, and the owners, who started Pizza Antica in San Jose, opened a third location this summer in Mill

Valley. Each is intended to be unique. "We want the restaurants to feel like reflections of their individual communities," says Drysdale. Still, the owners aim to open 12 Pizza Anticas.

"Our intent is to serve the whole community," says Drysdale. "If you're a vegetarian, if you like big fat steaks, if your grandma loves pasta, we've got it covered."

PREVIOUS PAGE: Executive chef and co-owner Gordon Drysdale with server Michael "Stix" Johnson. THIS PAGE: (top) spicy Calabrese sausage-topped pizza; (bottom) the dining room is always busy, often with families.

Pizza Antica's success is testament to Lafayette's changing demographic. The restaurant's superthin-crust pies, which are pinned (flattened with a rolling pin) rather than thrown, are decidedly more upscale than the large pepperoni pie at Freddie's, Pizza Antica's long-standing predecessor in the neighborhood.

When my companion and I dined at Pizza Antica recently, we were paired with Michael "Stix" Johnson, an impressively tall 24-year-old with an equally impressive amount of ink covering both arms. The tattoos upstaged the menu at first glance: Giuliano de' Medici and the Italian flag on his right arm, Buddha meditating on a lotus flower on his left.

Before we could ask about the soup of the day, he launched into its description (a portobello puree). A full report on that week's featured wines, the Patton Valley Rosé and Chukker Cabernet Franc, with "spiced plum flavor and soft tannins," followed. Stix sprinted off to get tastes of the two wines, then, intuiting our nonplussed reaction, repeated the process with more unsolicited tastes until we found a wine we loved: the Renwood Zinfandel.

Our loyalty to Stix secured, we took all his food recommendations. The Caesar salad comes with whole romaine leaves dressed to perfection. The bruschetta topped with tender sopressata melts on the palate, but the pizza takes center stage, as intended. The crust's crisp texture and smoky flavor strongly underlie any combination of toppings. The beef filet was topped with a pat of red wine-shallot butter, turning every bite into a delight.

The rhubarb crisp, which was allowed its natural tartness and was only gently sweetened by a scoop of strawberry gelato, was out of this world. Oh, and if you're looking for an answer to Pizza Antica's quiz show question, panna cotta means cooked cream, and the restaurant's version of the custard is beautifully light and silky. It, and the rhubarb crisp, go best with the La Sera Moscato dessert wine.

CONTACT: 3600 Mt. Diablo Blvd., Lafayette, (925) 299-0500, www.pizzaantica.com

HOURS: Lunch and dinner daily

PRICE: Pizzas \$8-\$15; entrées \$9-\$18

ALCOHOL: Wine and beer only ■