

Coco Pazzo marks three decades of bringing Tuscan cuisine to Chicago

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 The flavors and aromas of Tuscan cuisine star at Coco Pazzo in Chicago.

This year the eatery is celebrating its 30th anniversary of bringing quality Tuscan-inspired dishes to diners in the Windy City.

"I'm thrilled and so appreciative that we have been embraced by the community and they've supported us throughout the past 30 years," said Jack Weiss, president of Coco Pazzo restaurants. In addition to Cocco Pazzo on Hubbard Street, the more casual Coco Pazzo Cafe is located in Chicago's Streeterville neighborhood.

Weiss said through the years they've "been able to provide a consistent dining experience in a classic, elegant atmosphere."

He said quality service has always been important to him. Weiss said customers have long enjoyed being in the loft building the restaurant is housed in as well as seeing the open kitchen and the wood-burning oven. In fact, in 1992 when Coco Pazzo first opened, it was the first restaurant in town to feature a wood-burning oven.

Weiss said he handles the "food and logistics" surrounding the operation of Coco Pazzo while his wife Tamara, who is the restaurant's wine director, takes care of the beverage program.

"She's our resident wine expert," he said, adding they go to Italy twice a year to do culinary research and visit restaurants and wineries.

Weiss said they are committed to serving fresh, quality ingredients and classic dishes inspired by the Tuscany area.

"The cuisine is simple, healthy and unpretentious," he said.

Weiss said he came from New York to open Coco Pazzo in Chicago. His wife is a Chicago native.

"Italian cuisine has been my passion," said Weiss, who has been cooking since he was a young boy.

Presiding over the kitchen at CoCo Pazzo is Chef Eric Hammond.

"He's a wonderful, talented chef," Weiss said. "He brings a world of experience to the restaurant and has the best palate." Weiss said Hammond often experiments with various cooking styles and flavors when creating dishes. The menu is changed seasonally and tweaked as ingredients come into season throughout the year, he explained.

Calling the wood-burning oven the "showpiece" of the restaurant, Weiss said about 70% of the cooking done at Coco Pazzo is done in that oven. "It's really



PROVIDED

Rigatoni alla Buttera is one of the popular dishes at Coco Pazzo in Chicago.



ELOISE MARIE VALADEZ, THE TIMES

Branzino Al Forno, which is sea bass cooked in a wood-burning oven, is a specialty at Coco Pazzo.



PROVIDED

Pizza is seen cooking in the wood-burning oven at Coco Pazzo in Chicago.



PROVIDED

The interior of Coco Pazzo is pictured.

an art to use it."

Among dishes starring on the menu at Coco Pazzo are Rigatoni Alla Buttera, with fennel sausage, sweet peas, tomato, Parmesan and cream; Fettuccine Con Agnello, with spinach noodles and lamb ragu; Spaghetti Alle Vongole; Branzino Al Forno, which is a whole sea bass, which has been cooked in the wood-burning oven and is deboned at the diner's table; the veal dish Saltimbocca Di Vitello; as well as assorted pizzas; salads; various pastas; steaks; chicken dishes; appetizers and specialty desserts.

Weiss, who makes it a point to visit customer's tables while they're at Coco Pazzo, said he hopes diners have a great experience at the eatery.

"When I walk around the restaurant I want to see people having a good time," he said. "When you look in their eyes you can see if they're happy and enjoying what you do."

For more information on Coco Pazzo, 300 W. Hubbard St., Chicago, call 312-836-0900 or visit cocopazzo-chicago.com.

The recipe for Rigatoni alla Buttera which accompanies this article, is from Coco Pazzo.

Rigatoni alla Buttera

(Serves 4 people)

Ingredients for 4 people

For Sauce:

- 8 ounces Italian spicy sausage with fennel
- 1 can Italian peeled Tomatoes
- 3 ounce-can of Green Peas
- 8 ounces Heavy Cream

For Pasta:

- 1 pound Dried Rigatoni Pasta

- 3 ounces Sweet Butter
- 3 ounces grated Parmigiano
- Salt and black pepper, to taste

DIRECTIONS: Boil water in a large pot, (To be used for cooking the rigatoni.)

First peel the casing off the sausage, break the meat in small chunks.

Heat extra virgin olive oil in a large sauce pan and cook the sausage until lightly browned. Drain off excess fat and then add the butter, the peas and the tomatoes.

Cook until the sauce thickens and the peas are tender, then add the cream and reduce the heat, season with salt and black pepper.

Meanwhile, cook the Rigatoni pasta until al dente. Drain and add to the sauce along with the Parmigiano Reggiano. Stir gently until pasta is coated with the sauce. Then individually plate or put all in a large bowl or plate to serve.

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