



Publication Date: Friday, June 25, 2004

## From pizza to pasta

*La Strada transforms former Pizza A Go-Go site into sophisticated venue for authentic Italian cuisine*

by Dale F. Bentson

When the University Avenue space now occupied by La Strada was inhabited by Pizza A Go-Go the walls were adorned with a surfing motif. The transformation has been remarkable.

A lofty, open-beamed ceiling, with gently washed walls in tones of ochre and mustard, fresh flowers, contemporary lighting, candles and crisp white linens atop bare wood tables create a relaxed, understated sophistication.

There is a lot more to La Strada though than a snazzy décor, including outstanding Italian regional dishes, a lively, knowledgeable wait staff and a well crafted wine list. Chef-partner Donato Scotti has put together an exciting Italian menu based on recipes handed down through his family in Bergamo, Lombardy.

"We make authentic dishes, very simple but very, very fresh," said Scotti. The wonderful housemade ravioli, for instance, is boat shaped rather than square.

"In Bergamo, that is the traditional way of shaping ravioli. But it is more than shapes, it is a way of cooking," he said.

The appetizers alone make visiting La Strada worthwhile. One evening we started with Frascatella salad (\$7), a lively mix of fava beans and watercress, well dressed, in extra virgin olive oil with a breathe of lemon and shaved pecorino cheese.

Soncino e Farro (\$6.50), a tasty, comforting salad that combined mâche lettuce with organic spelt (a type of wheat grain often found in European soups and salads) was clad in a shallot vinaigrette dressing with Crescenza cheese (a soft, sweet cow's milk cheese from Lombardy).

There are special appetizers each evening as well. Dredged lightly in flour, the Monterey Bay sardines (\$4) had been quickly sautéed leaving them crisp yet meaty. The delicate fish was sated with sweet briny flavor. Another special was beautifully presented Melon and Prosciutto (\$10). The ripe

melon slices, draped with imported San Daniele ham (air and salt cured for eight months), was perfect with a squeeze of lemon. Loaded with flavor, these were ideal appetizers, not too large, and just enough to tease the taste buds.

I was not disappointed in the Chitarrine con Sugo d' Angello (\$12.50), thin housemade pasta blanketed beneath a luscious layer of braised lamb in red wine sauce. The lamb was slow cooked tender shards from the shank. The gravy was thick and rich and I happily employed a chunk of bread to scrape the remaining sauce from the bowl.

The wonderful boat shaped ravioli is called Casonsei alla Bergamasca (\$12.95). I had it filled with housemade sausage that had been sweetened with a splash of amaretto and topped with brown butter, sage and crispy guanciale (a sweet bacon). The thick cut pasta was ideally suited to the richly flavored dish.

Housemade spinach Tortelloni (\$12.95) had been stuffed with braised artichoke puree, shallots and ricotta cheese. Topped with fresh chopped tomatoes, roasted garlic and roasted ricotta, the tortelloni was delightful but for my money not quite as intriguing as the ravioli.

Besides pasta, La Strada offers several risottos. I loved the Risotto with fava beans and quail (\$15.95). Firmer grained Carnaroli rice was used instead of the more well known Arborio. The chewier rice was more flavorful. The fava beans complimented the rice and paired well with the roasted quail which nested atop the rice. An unusual and tasty parmesan cracker and a salad of mixed arugula accompanied.

Pollento alla Diavola (\$14.95), tender, grilled "natural" chicken marinated in a medley of peppers, was served with roasted asparagus and rosemary Yukon potatoes. The fleshy chicken retained some tang from the peppers while the agreeable vegetables infused additional texture and color to the dish.

Another noteworthy entrée was the fish of the day, Pesce del Mediterraneo (\$24.95). The fish can be prepared in any of three ways: Oven roasted, grilled or poached. On our visit, the fish, which we ordered grilled, was a Mediterranean bass called branzino. The fish was served whole and our waiter expertly deboned it tableside. The bass had been marinated in olive oil, lemon, salt, garlic and oregano (salmoriglio marinade). Delicate and flaky, the fish exuded flavor. The dish was completed with roasted garlic potatoes and greens.

Desserts were uniformly marvelous. The Soffiato di Cioccolato (\$6) was a warm, creamy chocolate mini soufflé drizzled with coffee sauce and a scoop of vanilla gelato on the side. Allow extra preparation time for this worthwhile dessert.

The exceptional spongy layered Tiramisu (\$5) was served in a glass sundae dish. The light and airy cake, soaked in coffee from Gianni Frasi, one of Italy's premier roasters, imparted a hint of walnut flavor. Drizzled with caramel sauce and buried under shavings of chocolate, this rendition has my vote for best in the area.

The beautifully rendered Panna Cotta (\$5.50) packed a sweet surprise. In the center of the custard was a bubble of passion fruit puree which added a dimension of color and flavor to the creamy dessert. Another custardy dessert was the Crema Bruna (\$5), a handsome flat flan of crème brûlée

infused with Sicilian lemon. The burnt sugar top was the perfect compliment to the rich custard beneath.

An outstanding way to conclude any dinner is with cheese. At La Strada, we were presented with four cheeses: brinata, a kind of sheep's milk brie, Gorgonzola, rocollo, and tallegio -- all cow's milk cheeses, (\$8). A basket of fresh bread accompanied. With a glass of Barolo it was almost spiritual.

Michael Iglesias and Scotti have put together an excellent and well priced wine menu with two dozen wines available by the glass. The list is a composite of Italian and California wines designed to compliment but not overwhelm the food. Iglesias is available to offer expert advice on food and wine pairings. Corkage fee is \$10. Liquor license secured, the full bar opened this past week.

La Strada is another grand improvement along the University Avenue dining corridor. It has an attentive, knowledgeable wait staff, inspired food, colorful inviting décor and excellent wine list.

*La Strada*, 335 University Ave., Palo Alto, (650) 324-8300, [www.lastradapaloalto.com](http://www.lastradapaloalto.com)

*Hours*; Monday - Wednesday 11:30 a.m. - 10:00 p.m.; Thursday - Saturday 11:30 a.m. - 11:00 p.m.; Brunch Sunday 10:30 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

*Highlights*: Casonsei alla Bergamasca (\$12.95), Risotto with fava beans and quail (\$15.95), Tiramisu (\$5).

*Atmosphere*: Warm and sophisticated with an open, airy kitchen, walls washed in ochre and mustard and candlelight.

Reservations: yes	Credit cards: yes	Parking: city lots	Alcohol: full bar
Children: high chairs	Outdoor dining: street side patio	Party and banquet facilities: private room	Take out: yes
Catering: yes	Noise level: high	Bathroom cleanliness: excellent	



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