

Palo Alto's La Strada knows authentic Italian

CURED MEATS, PIZZAS, PASTAS STAR ON MENU RICH IN DIVERSITY

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By Sheila Himmel
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Did downtown Palo Alto need another Italian restaurant? Not another high-priced mediocre one, certainly, but La Strada, definitely.

Open since February in the former Pizza A Go-Go, La Strada is pulling off the unlikely trick of serving fresh, authentic foods from around the Italian peninsula without making a big fuss about it. One party animal on the block, the Cheesecake Factory, is enough.

What La Strada (which means the street) adds to the neighborhood is more personal:

- Donato Scotti, the amiable chef formerly of Il Fornaio, the exquisite Valentino restaurant in Los Angeles and a small town northeast of Milan.
- The sound of Italian being spoken by customers.
- Whispers of cured and dried meats floating from a hand-crank meat slicer.

Patio and banquette

Including a small, covered patio on University Avenue, La Strada holds 80 people. In the back are a banquette that's nice for groups and a small room that's nice for more intimate conversation or private parties. Washed yellow and orange walls keep decor comfortably in the background.

Service is a little uncoordinated. You may have to ask for utensils and water and live with being called "guys." Sure, some dishes are base hits rather than home runs, but there are no fouls.

For a clear winner, start with the appetizer plate called *affettati della casa* and confusingly described on the menu with prices ranging from \$7 to \$9 a person, depending on which meats you want. For \$8, a landscape of impossibly thin Parma prosciutto, Leoncini mortadella ("what Bologna wants to be," our server aptly described it), the chef's own salame Toscano and, for the one beef item, air-dried *bresaola*. The 1963 Berkel meat slicer, made in Rotterdam, is the king of slicers, Scotti said later. The point is, meat comes off it without getting heated. I could go on, but go ahead and get a meat plate, with its little bowl of olives and a couple slices of rosemary foccacia.

The spring fava bean salad (\$7) also is a rare treat: blanched beans that haven't turned to paste, with tangy watercress, drizzled in lemon and olive oil and topped with a flap of sharp pecorino cheese.

The one-page menu includes eight other salads and starters, but don't miss the wood-fired, thin-crust pizza. Three come in vegetarian styles, and there is one with tuna and one with sausage. The crust isn't greasy on the bottom, and even the house-made spicy sausage doesn't leave pools. Also on this 10-inch personal pizza (\$12): fresh tomato slices and porcini mushrooms under a light coat of mozzarella.

These are dinner prices. Lunch is slightly less, and in place of several entrees are sandwiches, fresh and grilled.

In the pasta department, diversity rules. Among the house-made pastas are shoestring noodles with Colorado lamb braised in Montepulciano wine (\$12.50), in which a good half of the portion is meat. Ricotta cheese and braised artichoke hearts fill the plump house-made purses called spinach tortelloni (\$12.95), topped with fresh tomatoes, roasted garlic and pieces of baked ricotta that look like baby bread slices.

Half a plump Fulton Valley Sonoma chicken (\$14.95) has been marinated in lemon juice and white, black, pink and cayenne peppers and paprika. Simply a wonderful meal, served currently with roasted asparagus and baby Yukon potatoes.

In reciting and selling specials, servers may not volunteer prices. They should. *Branzino*, the Mediterranean sea bass (\$24.95) turned out to be pretty small, and with the same tired cucumber-tomato salad that had been touted as a special (\$6.50). The kitchen's deboning skills needed work. Still, the server suggested having the fish marinated and grilled rather than oven-roasted or poached, and he was right.

Refreshing wine list

Our server also gave good wine advice. Eighty California and Italian wines fit on one page, and they aren't the old warhorses. The suggested '02 Roero Arneis, Casina Val Del Prete "Luet" (\$8 a glass, \$32 a bottle) is one reason Italian white wines are getting a lot of attention lately.

For dessert, the lemony custard in *crema brulée* (\$5) was hard to reach under a thick top.

Instead, my advice is end as you began, with an assortment. The cheese plate (\$8) is arranged clockwise from mild (say, soft and creamy *robiola* sheep's milk cheese) and buttery (*taleggio*) to extra-strength (Gorgonzola), with slices of pear and either truffle honey or a five-fruit compote. Now *that's* sweet.

La Strada

335 University Ave., near Florence Street, Palo Alto.

www.lastradapaloalto.com (650) 324-8300

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- The Dish:** Donato Scotti oversees his simple, casual Italian restaurant with great heart and a hand-crank meat slicer.
- Price range:** Lunch appetizers \$5-\$8, entrees \$7- \$15.95. Dinner appetizers \$5-\$8, entrees \$10-\$24.95. Corkage \$10.
- Details:** Full bar. Patio.
- Pluses:** Authentic dishes from around the Italian peninsula.
- Minuses:** Servers may call you “guy.”
- Hours:** 11:30 a.m. - 10 p.m. Mondays - Wednesdays,
11:30 a.m. - 11 p.m. Thursdays - Saturdays,
10:30 a.m. - 10 p.m. Sundays.

Restaurant reviews are conducted anonymously. The Mercury News pays for all meals.

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