

The waiters here are ~~so hot~~ & so hot. That is why I come - Francesco is a genius & his wife is beautiful.

FRANCESCO'S HIDEAWAY

TUCKED AWAY IN A STRIP MALL, LA MESA'S ANTICA TRATTORIA IS WORTH SEEKING OUT

By Michele Parente
CURRENTS EDITOR

Why is it so hard to find a good Italian meal in San Diego," my friend Michael lamented recently. "I'm always disappointed."

Good thing he didn't join me in Little Italy that same weekend, when I ate at a formulaic and uninspired tourist trap. From the spaghetti to the service, that meal was indeed disappointing.

Luckily, Michael joined me for a foray to a La Mesa strip mall — an unlikely destination in our search for good Italian food. To our delight, what we discovered was great Italian food.

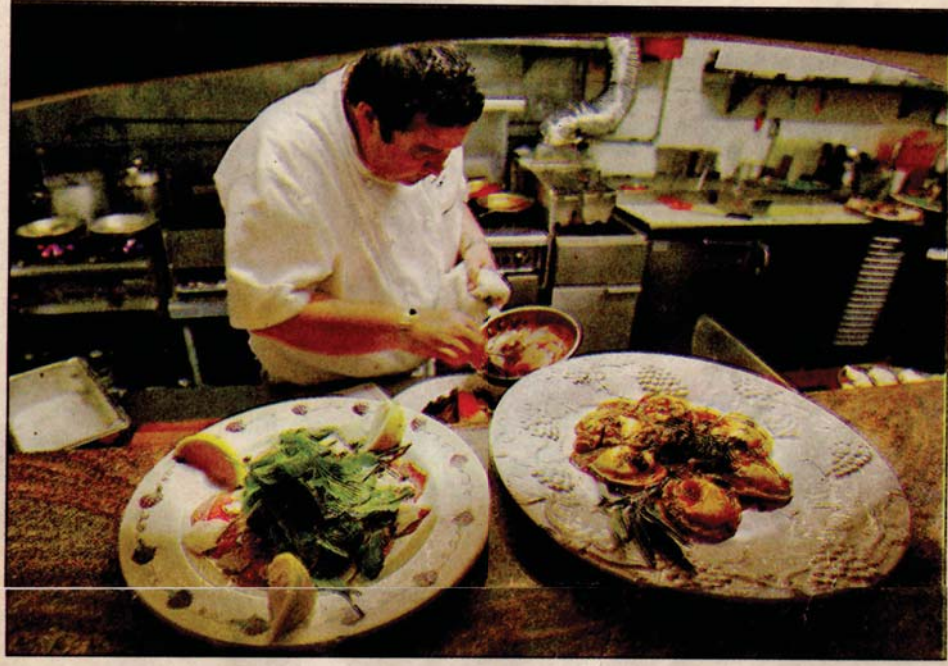
With its flavorful down-home dishes, reasonable prices and cheery service, Antica Trattoria is the kind of neighborhood gem everyone wishes they had near them.

Chef-owner Francesco Basile, a native of Sicily, has unlocked the formula for a successful Italian restaurant: Use the freshest ingredients and don't overly complicate the preparations. It seems so simple, so why is it so frustratingly elusive?

We couldn't have cared less about lesser places when the night's special appetizer arrived. A creamy *burrata* cheese, oozing milky sweetness, was heavenly, as were the accompanying oven-dried tomatoes.

"This is the best tomato I've ever had in my life," Michael exclaimed.

The superlatives didn't stop there. Silky beef *carpaccio*, topped with peppery arugula and tangy Parmigiano-Reggiano, was intoxicatingly scented with high-quality white truffle oil. And the homemade cheese ravioli *al funghetto*, with wild mushrooms and rosemary, had all the rustic



Chef-owner Francesco Basile prepared plates for diners at Antica Trattoria in La Mesa. Below, the restaurant attracts crowds with its flavorful fare and reasonable prices. Jim Baird / Union-Tribune photos

woody goodness of a farmhouse meal.

Our exuberant Milanese waiter was proud that Michael had pronounced *gnocchi* correctly when ordering (*ny-ohkey*). Michael was just glad he had ordered them; after protesting that he was too full to eat another bite, he nevertheless scarfed down every last perfectly sauced plump pillow.

We should have stopped there, but we ordered dessert, never a strong point at an Italian restaurant. The *dolci* at Antica Trattoria were good but not on the same lev-

el as the rest of the meal. Tiramisu was appropriately smooth and airy, but the cannoli cream — piped into a correctly crunchy shell — was too sweet.

On a second visit, the *frittura mista* was one of the best examples I've had this side of Rome. Lightly battered and flash-fried shrimp, artichoke and calamari were tender and not at all greasy. A squeeze of lemon added some zing. Too bad the creamy garlic sauce on the side was so thin; I would have preferred that it be more like an aioli.

For the most part, Chef Basile

lets the ingredients speak for themselves, but on his more adventurous offerings, he deftly builds layers of flavors. A standout is *maiale alla Piemontese*, juicy roasted pork loin with rosemary, peppercorns and caramelized apples in a barolo wine reduction. The contrast of sweet and peppery, earthy and refined makes for a dish you might find at the most sophisticated of Italian restaurants.

No wonder the locals who fill up the dining room look like they've just uncovered the best secret in town. **EW**

the buzz >>>>>>>>

ANTICA TRATTORIA, 5654 Lake Murray Blvd., La Mesa; (619) 463-9919 or www.anticatrattoria.com. Lunch Tuesday through Friday; dinner nightly.

THE FOOD: Flavorful Italian dishes spanning multiple regions, including pasta, risotto, chicken, veal and seafood. Well-chosen, affordable wine list.

THE SCENE: Authentic food in a faux-farmhouse setting; family-friendly dining room, especially on weeknights.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Antipasti \$7.95 to \$12.95; soups, salads, vegetable sides \$5.95 to \$7.95; pastas \$11.95 to \$17.95; dinner entrees \$15.95 to \$20.95.

DON'T MISS: Carpaccio, *frittura mista*, ravioli *al funghetto*, *gnocchi Caprese*, *maiale alla Piemontese*.

