

Paisano's on Broadway – When Italy is too Far Away
(or – Don't Forget About It!)

By Denise Schultz for The Spirit of Geneva Lakes, October 2006

One of the most popular reasons for living in the lakes area is our proximity to Chicago. Some enjoy the fact that within 90 minutes they can drive to the city and enjoy some of the world's finest dining, shopping, and more. Personally, I'm a born and bred Wisconsinite and I would rather not have to...

This is one of the reasons why I was absolutely thrilled with my visit to Paisano's on Broadway, a new Italian Bistro in downtown Richmond. That's right – Richmond, Illinois – just 20 minutes from Lake Geneva.

Classy. Affordable. Fun. And absolutely delicious are words that easily came to mind while I enjoyed a dinner meeting at the new hot spot. Heather Porps, one of the ladies with whom I dined, works in Twin Lakes and had told me, "Everyone is talking about it – it's been busy since the doors opened." It's no wonder why. Phil and Karen Gilardi offer what we all want. Excellent food, outstanding service, a wonderful atmosphere, and all at a reasonable price. What more can we ask for?

Previously an antique store, the 150-year old building has been completely renovated by the Gilardi's. Gleaming wood floors, marbled pillars and the stunning Mediterranean murals create an atmosphere of comfortable elegance and more than a little romance. Even the ceiling has been hand painted with delicate, fluffy clouds against a tranquil blue sky. White linen tablecloths, beautiful table services and first-class furnishings did not go unnoticed as we immediately fell in love with Paisano's on Broadway. It's like Italy – only closer.

Immediately after being seated, we were greeted by a smiling Phil Gilardi. We instantly liked this "full-blooded Sicilian" and were charmed by the stories of his family – from his son who has taken over his previous restaurant in Vernon Hills (turning Gilardi's into Philly G's) to his mother Angie whose recipes are used at both restaurants and is one of the head chef's at Paisano's, and even Grandma Sophie, who has inspired them all. I'm embarrassed to admit that I think we may have begun drooling as we listened to Phil describe some of the house specialties. When he told us their Fried Calamari was the best in the world, he was apparently not kidding, because ours was gone in a matter of minutes. The texture and taste were amazing, and the table was a hum of "mmm's and ahhh's" as we enjoyed it.

We asked Phil for suggestions on our entrée selections. Michelle Van de Bogert, the third diner at our table couldn't resist ordering the Stuffed Rolled Eggplant, after Phil described the eggplant breaded and rolled around a homemade stuffing mixture of ricotta cheese and ground meat, then oven baked with meat sauce and parmesan cheese. She said it was amazing.

The other two of us ordered one of the daily fresh fish specials – Basil and Parmesan Crusted Salmon with garlic and olive oil over fettuccine. It was a delicious meal, and half of the business we had intended to discuss went out the window as we spent most of our time reflecting on the delectable dinners and comfortable atmosphere. (Time well spent.) From the warm fresh-baked bread in the beginning to the mouth-watering gelato and rich coffee and tiramisu at the end, it was an absolutely enjoyable meal.

It speaks volumes that we were visiting over dessert and were all suddenly shocked to find our dessert plates empty. We laughed in unison that we had polished off every bite. Phil's lovely wife Karen was busy working the floor while we dined, and her positive energy could be felt radiating through the entire restaurant. He credits her with much of the success of their business and is proud of her accomplishments as a graduate of the Homemade Pastry and Gelato Institute of New York. "Her homemade cannolis are out of this world!" he said as she breezed by with a sample of one of their specialties known as Sphingies (fried dough with sweetened ricotta and dusted with powdered sugar.)

"Everything is fresh and homemade," Phil told us proudly. "We don't even have a freezer – why would we need one?" he chuckled. "We make everything fresh when you order it." Karen stopped to visit for a few minutes, then was back to doing what she does best – making sure all of their guests are happy.

Let's take a look at some of the other items available on the menu at Paisano's on Broadway. For starters we've already covered the delicious Calamari. Other appetizers (Antipasti) include Clams (baked with seasoned breadcrumbs or raw on the half shell), Sausage and Peppers, Pasta Fritta (hand-rolled pasta stuffed with prosciutto, provolone and spinach, served in Arrabiatta sauce), and Bruschetta (toasted Italian bread topped with garlic, fresh basil, olive oil tomatoes, red onions and parmigiana cheese.)

Soup (Zuppe) choices include Minestrone and Soup du Jour. Ala carte vegetable choices (Verdura) include Steamed Broccoli or Asparagus, Marinated and Grilled Vegetables or Spinach Sautéed with Garlic and Olive Oil.

From the many ala carte salad options, we chose to sample the Roasted Peppers and Fresh Mozzarella, which was divine, and reminds me that I need to go back real soon. Other choices could have included a Caesar, House or Chopped green salad, Bocconcini (fresh mozzarella, basil and plum tomatoes) or a Wedge of iceberg lettuce with chopped plum tomatoes and homemade blue cheese dressing.

As you can imagine, the pasta choices are an entire page of the extensive menu. Traditional Spaghetti with homemade meat or marinara sauce, with or without homemade meatballs or sausage, Cavatelli with Broccoli sautéed in garlic and olive oil, Fettuccine Alfredo, Chicken Tortellacci Alfredo, and Angie's special Lasagna are only a few of the delicious Italian entrees available. Gnocci with homemade Vodka Cream Sauce, Sausage Rotini with roasted red and yellow peppers and mushrooms, Rigatoni Bolognese, Linguini with Clam Sauce and Eggplant Parmigiana round out the enticing list from

which it's nearly impossible to choose. (Tip – ask Phil, Karen or your server – they'll help you decide like they did for us.)

By the way, there are at least two more pages of entrees on the menu at Paisano's on Broadway. From Chicken dishes like Parmigiana, Vesuvio or Cacciatore to Veal options like Picatta, Parmigiana, Francese, Scallopine and Saltimbocca, you will certainly have to visit more than once to try your favorite dishes. Steaks from New York Strip to Filet Mignon and Marinated Skirt are all Prime. Two pork chop and three shrimp dishes are followed by Paisano's Lobster Milanese (a 12-14 oz. lobster tail, lightly breaded, pan sautéed and served in a lemon butter sauce over homemade garlic mashed potatoes with fresh asparagus.)

If you have to save some of your meal aside, do take it home, because you must save room for homemade dessert. Whether you choose Angie's homemade Cheesecake, Tiramisu, Key Lime Pie, Sphingies, Gelato or Cannoli – you'll leave with a smile on your face.

Before or after you've enjoyed this amazing culinary experience, relax for a drink at the full-service bar. If you're lucky you may catch Phil performing some of his magic, literally. I had the fortunate experience of meeting his long-time friend Frank Tedesso who beamed with fraternal pride as he said "Phil is fortunate because what he likes is always in tune with what other people like. I support every one of his ventures, because every one of them is successful." This familial feeling echoed throughout the bar and restaurant during our visit. Most diners appeared to be friends with the Gilardi's, with some of the diners having been there several times just that week. Some lived blocks away, and others were from the Chicago area. And yet, by the time I left I realized, I was no different – I would appear to be a long-time friend of the Gilardi's to an outsider too. That's just the way they are...and that's just the kind of feeling you get at Paisano's. It's warm, comfortable, a place to enjoy special times.

If the first few weeks are any indication, Paisano's on Broadway will be no exception to Phil's success record. In fact, you may want to call (815) 678-4500 to make a reservation soon, to be sure you get an opportunity to enjoy Richmond's new hot spot. The non-smoking Italian Bistro is open every night but Monday and easy to find, just a block off Highway 12 on Broadway. Enjoy a trip to Italy, without the travel hassles –
Abbondanza!

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