

La Vecchia: Modern Italian Comfort Food

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Written by Story by Hannah Hind Photos by Julie Granata
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Instead of getting on a jet and flying to Northern Italy, we drove down South Virginia where Alberto Gazzola and ten-year-old son Luca welcomed us into La Vecchia, his long-time Italian restaurant. La Vecchia Verese (the old Varese) is where Alberto was born and raised. He started his cooking escapades with his father in the kitchen. "Mom was the head cook of the household," he explained, but his father was the risotto specialist. Alberto was his little sous chef at age 5, and was put to work diligently stirring the rich rice until perfectly al dente. Thus began his deep passion for food and his career as an Italian chef. How did Reno fall into his cards? Alberto's childhood friend was studying at UNR and asked Alberto to visit The Biggest Little City. Upon arrival, Alberto's friend had a job lined up for him at La Trattoria. Vacation turned permanent, he worked for them for a year, and decided to open his own establishment. La Vecchia has been open since 1991, and although Alberto's roots are far away, the La Vecchia he has created in Reno has the flavor and heart of his Italian home.

"For very few it is a career," Alberto confesses of restaurant work. However, he has managed a solid staff for many years. "He has been with me for 16 years, since day one," he says smiling and pointing at a tall man serving a table. Another consistent quality of Alberto is his dedication to the Reno community and sharing his time. Recently he taught an Italian wine and cheese course at Whole Foods Market, and is preparing to host an Italian dinner there soon. Alberto's other passion is motorcycles. He founded the Ducati Owners Club — DOC — a few years ago and began "Tuesday Bike Nights" at the restaurant. With the extracurricular activities, when does he have time to run La Vecchia?

He is in the restaurant nightly, cooking his Italian dishes and enjoying every minute. Sometimes if you're lucky, he will make something not on the menu just for you. But, you will be just as impressed with anything they offer. His mother's lasagna, his absolute favorite, is on the menu, along with the risotto with which he helped his father when he was younger.

While Alberto sizzled and stirred, Luca chatted us up about his loves—science, math and building Star Wars space ships with his Legos. I asked him if he wanted to grow up and run a restaurant like his dad. After a short silence, he admitted, "I'd rather be an architect or engineer." Alberto smiles and says, "He gets that from his mother." Tomomi, Alberto's wife, is originally from Japan and does the books for the restaurant. So with a Japanese mother and Italian father, what is Luca's favorite food? "I love my dad's seafood ravioli, but my mom makes a killer tuna salad!" The flicker in his eyes and big cheek smile speak directly to Alberto, who is laughing and telling his own stories in the kitchen.

The Gazzolas had all of us smiling from ear to ear, dreaming of the Italian countryside, and salivating for whatever was making the heavenly aroma wafting through the kitchen. Then, before we knew it, the dishes were out, the wine was poured, and our forks were in hand. The recipes Alberto shared are simple and delicious. Make them at home for your family, or take a trip to La Vecchia and dine with Alberto's.

(775) 825-1113

HOURS

LUNCH Monday-Friday, 11 a.m.-2 p.m.

DINNER Sunday-Thursday, 5 p.m.-9 p.m.

Friday & Saturday, 5 p.m.-10 p.m.

LOCATION

3501 South Virginia Street, Reno

At the corner of South Virginia Street and Moana Lane

Hannah Hind is a Reno-based freelance writer and trained chef.



Rigatoni with Salmon

- 4 oz salmon (1 inch diced)
- 1 Tbl chopped shallots
- 1 oz vodka
- 1 cup cream
- 4 vine-ripened tomatoes (1/2 inch diced)
- salt & pepper to taste
- 2 large handfuls rigatoni (boiled in well salted water to "al dente." Drain and set aside)

1. Melt 1 Tbl butter in a skillet then add the shallots. 2. Once they are lightly caramelized, add the salmon and salt and pepper.
3. Sauté until the salmon is golden brown and cooked to about medium temperature. 4. Deglaze* with the vodka (watch out for some flaming action) then add the cream and the tomatoes.
5. Cook for a few minutes, until the cream is reduced by half and tomatoes are soft. 6. Add cooked rigatoni, toss and serve right away. Serves 2. P.S. If you have it available, season the salmon with lavender salt (you can make your own lavender salt by taking 1 cup kosher salt and adding 1/4 cup dried lavender, let sit for at least five days).

*deglazing: the action of adding a liquid to a hot pan to lift the "fond" off the bottom



Risotto with Italian Sausage

- 4 handfuls risotto
- 2 diced Italian sausages
- 1 cup red wine (San Givovese or Chianti works well)
- 1 Tbl + 1 tsp butter
- 1 small diced onion
- 2+ cups low sodium chicken broth
- 1/4 cup fresh grated Parmesan cheese

1. Melt the butter in a small pot then add the onions and the sausage. 2. Cook until the onions are golden and the sausage is cooked through. 3. Add the risotto, stir until the risotto is coated and translucent. 4. Add the wine and cook until it's evaporated then start adding the chicken broth in small increments while constantly stirring (little helpers are perfect for this job). The risotto will be ready when the kernel is soft outside but still slightly crunchy on the inside (about 25-30 minutes). 5. Add the Parmesan and a little more butter, stir until incorporated (mantecare) and serve. Serves 2.



Stacciatella

(Italian Egg Drop Soup)

- 2 eggs
- 1 handful of spinach
- 1 small tomato (diced)
- 1/4 cup freshly grated Parmesan
- 2 cups chicken broth

1. Put the chicken broth in a medium size pot and bring to a boil. 2. In a bowl, mix first four ingredients together with a wire whisk and a pinch of salt and pepper. 3. Add the egg mixture to the boiling broth, bring back to a boil and boil for 1 minute. 4. Pull off the stove and with a fork, break the "omelet" that formed on the top of the broth. Serve immediately. Serves 2.



Panna Cotta

- 2 quarts whipping cream
- 1 1/4 cups powdered sugar
- 1 vanilla bean
- 6 sheets of gelatin (available at Whole Foods)

1. Mix 1 quart of whipping cream with powdered sugar in a large stock pot. 2. Split the vanilla bean lengthwise with a knife and remove the bean. 3. Add the whole bean and seeds to the cream and sugar mixture, bring to a boil. 4. Add the whole heat; add 6 sheets of prepared gelatin (softened in cold water until loose and flexible like cooked pasta, drain); stir until dissolved. 5. Add the other quart of cold whipping cream and stir. Mixture will be quite thin and runny. 6. Pour into single serving dessert cups and refrigerate (for at least 8 hours) to solidify. Makes 10-12 servings.

Panna cotta is a very versatile dish. It can be flavored or garnished however you wish. In the summer, try fresh berries. In the winter, garnish with some caramel and diced apples. You can also add flavor to the panna cotta itself. A few drops of peppermint flavoring (added after gelatin has been mixed in) around the winter holidays makes a great dessert. Finish by sprinkling with a crushed candy cane.

