

Dining Out: Count on Piccola for good, home-style Italian fare

By RICK WADE, For Entertainment

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When Ristorante Piccola Roma closed abruptly early in 2009, Annapolis lost a reliable destination for home-style Italian cuisine with a flair right in the heart of Main Street.

Months went by and the empty storefront was a sad reminder of the good food and ambiance that added to downtown's rich array of dining choices.

But Piccola Roma is back, reopened last fall by Maureen and Marc Lucas, owners of the adjacent State House Inn. They returned the previous chefs, brothers Jose and Ulices Ayala, to the stove and added a few dishes to the menu.

And the result?

The same reliable destination for good, home-style Italian cuisine with flair.

Our trio arrived at 6 p.m. on a Friday with only one other table occupied. By 7:30, the intimate dining room — only 21 tables — was nearly full. Piccola Roma has two dining areas, one in the front with the large windows facing Main Street (great people-watching for diners, great food-watching for passersby) and a second section in the rear, cozier and quieter.

If anything could improve Piccola's warm atmosphere, it would be a more consistent choice of background music. It was sometimes too loud with occasional pop vocals. The feel of Piccola would seem to suggest a more subdued musical menu.

When you go

- **WHAT:** Ristorante Piccola Roma.
- **WHERE:** 200 Main St., Annapolis.
- **PHONE:** 410-268-7898.
- **WEBSITE:** www.piccolaromaannapolis.com
- **HOURS:** Lunch: 11:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Monday-Sunday. Dinner: 5:30-10 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 5-11 p.m. Friday-Saturday, 4-9 p.m. Sunday.

- **CHEFS:** Jose and Ulices Ayala.
- **APPETIZERS:** \$6-\$12.
- **PASTAS AND ENTREES:** \$16-\$31.
- **RESERVATIONS:** Accepted by phone and by Open Table.
- **CREDIT CARDS:** American Express, Discover, MasterCard and Visa.
- **ACCESSIBILITY:** Yes.

There are restaurants that give you immediate confidence just by the table settings — someone did it with care and pride — and so it is with Piccola. The menu reaches out to every appetite with antipasti (\$8-12), soup and salad of course, a dozen pasta and risotto dishes (\$16-22) and an entrée menu including fish, veal, beef, lamb, chicken, duck, shellfish, pork and a nod to the vegetarians (\$19-31).

Servers are also quick to tell you that the kitchen strives to give you “what you want, how you want it” and they will add and subtract ingredients or improvise at the guest’s request.

There’s a full bar and a good beer selection, but it’s the thoughtful wine list that commands your attention as the right complement for the food. Some restaurant wine lists drop with a thud on the table with so many choices it’s daunting, while others seem an afterthought. Almost all the Piccola selections are Italian with 10 available by the glass at \$9-12 and more than two dozen by the bottle from \$30 up.

We started with dry whites — pinot grigio and orvieto — that arrived with light, airy bread and excellent quality olive oil — always a sign that the owners and chefs are on target.

The antipasti (appetizer) offerings can be as simple as bruschetta (Tuscan bread, olive oil, tomatoes and basil at \$6) or the grander Prosciutto e Granchio (prosciutto, crabmeat and artichokes in puff pastry at \$12), both of which will be on the list next time around.

For this visit, one of us ordered the Caprese (mozzarella and tomato salad with a balsamic reduction at \$8), and another the Prosciutto e Mozzarella (\$9, also with tomatoes, basil and a drizzle of that good olive oil).

Let’s face it — tomatoes during late springtime (when we visited Piccola) often look as though they were shipped in from a foreign country (and maybe they were). The contents of these dishes lacked the color and texture of the summer gems that are surely on the table now, but the flavor was surprisingly rich and both diners were delighted.

The third appetizer was a straightforward plate of grilled scallops, perfectly done with a smoky flavor and accompanied by a rich arugula pesto — a deliciously light meal starter.

Two of the three entrées — a beef filet and a duck breast — aren’t what most Americans think of as Italian dishes, but the Ayala brothers know that Italians enjoy beef and duck in their style — and so should we.

The filet (\$31) was a generous cut, cooked perfectly to order, but the diner had requested no

mushrooms in a dish described as a grilled beef stuffed with shallots and mushrooms and drizzled with a truffle oil demi-glaze. The kitchen complied.

Whatever the dish is like with the mushrooms, it was a winner without them, as were the roasted potatoes and vegetables that surrounded it.

The duck breast (\$24), with shiitake mushrooms in a brandy cream sauce, was pink (as it should be) with very little fat and a lot of rich flavor. With mashed potatoes everywhere on menus these days, the diner asked the waiter to suggest an alternative. Gently, he informed us that the mashed potatoes were key to the presentation and urged the diner not to stray.

It was good advice.

The potatoes on a puff pastry crust neatly balanced the rich flavors of the meat and brandy cream sauce and provided eye and palate appeal.

The third diner in our group opted for a special — the four-cheese vegetable lasagna (\$18). It was lovely to look at and creamy and comforting on the fork. Only a more vigorous hand with the herbs and a pinch more salt could have been wished for in an otherwise homey presentation.

Good Italian cooking sometimes can lead to a wave of the hand when the waiter asks if anyone would like to see a dessert menu. But since one of our trio was leaving for a college trip to France and England the next morning, the occasion was deemed special enough to command a serving of her favorite — tiramisu.

Piccola's cannolis (another choice for a future visit) are made in-house with the rest of the desserts from outside sources, all at \$8. The tiramisu was about to get a tough test. The diner, though just 21, has tasted this Italian classic dozens of times and quickly pronounced Piccola's among the best.

Among the pleasures of our visit to Piccola was the service: attentive, never intrusive, informed, helpful, friendly and engaging.

The May evening was unusually warm in downtown Annapolis. As expected on a Friday night, the streets were teeming with tourists, hometowners out for an evening, mids, high school prom couples and people ending a long week at work.

By the time we left the restaurant, Piccola seemed to be welcoming some of each to come in and enjoy. Not all restaurants can pull it off: a feeling of formality and informality at the same time in both food and ambiance.

Rick Wade is a freelance writer based in Arnold.