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Orinda's Taverna Pellegrini: A Place to Come Back To

By A.K. Carroll



Photos A.K. Carroll

Dario Hadjian, owner of Orinda's Taverna Pellegrini that opened for business in mid-September, says he likes to eat and he loves to cook. The statement won't surprise anyone who has smelled the gorgonzola cream sauce that coddles his homemade gnocchi or tasted a steaming slice of his fire-roasted pizza. "My pizza is amazing," Hadjian attests. "As thin as it can be and as light as it can be."

Persian by birth and Italian by heart, Hadjian pronounces "prosciutto" and "mozzarella" as they were meant to be spoken: with elongated vowels and short staccato consonants.

Hadjian fell in love with Rome as a young man, wandering his way through the city's cobblestone streets and among its ancient monuments. During the time that he attended Rome's American University, he got "a new batch of

friends" every semester. "Romans are easy-going,"

said Hadjian, who grew accustomed to showing around foreigners, sharing with them the things he enjoyed most.

Hadjian's love of cooking, eating, and Roman cuisine are the passions that he brought to Piazza Pellegrini, the Italian restaurant he opened in San Francisco's North Beach neighborhood over 10 years ago. Prior to getting his own place, Hadjian worked in California's food industry for over a decade, helping to open spots like Café Tiramisu and Caffè Delle Stelle.

"It gave me a good chance to learn a lot about the business," said Hadjian, who also started his own import and export company bottling olive oils and balsamic vinegars.

"Like every person in the restaurant business, you're stupid enough to want your own place until you have it," Hadjian joked. "[But] if you like people and being with people, you get hooked on this kind of environment, even if it's really hard."

Hadjian, it would seem, is just that kind of person, hence the opening of Taverna Pellegrini, an East Bay outpost of his original establishment. "I'd been looking to expand and having lived in Walnut Creek and Lafayette prior to opening in San Francisco, I wanted to open a place here. I know a lot of people and the environment here in Orinda is really nice."

Hadjian likes the taverna's proximity to BART and the freeway, one that allows him to share staff with his North Beach location. "These guys are my family," he says of his employees. "I take care of them they take care of me."

On the menu at Taverna Pellegrini, you'll see many of the same Roman Italian specialties, from the classic bruschetta made with melted fontina cheese and sautéed mushrooms to mista and arugula salads, an array of wood-fired pizzas and paninis, and no shortage of primis and secondis. The restaurant has a full bar and a generous wine list.

With seating for up to 100 guests, the Tuscan-inspired space is brightly painted and divided into a partially-enclosed front dining room with window seats, a central bar with plenty of stools and two television screens, and a back section of two- and four-top tables. "I liked the space," said Hadjian, who hopes to expand into catering and private events and now has the room to do so. The taverna is currently open seven days a week for dinner only, with plans for brunch and lunch options in the near future.

Specialties of the house include spinach, meat, crab, squash, and lobster raviolis (each of

which is made daily by hand and uniquely colored); wood-fired pizzas, and saltimbocca alla piemontese - a butterflied chicken breast filled with prosciutto and mozzarella and served in a cream sage sauce with steamed vegetables and herbed potatoes. Though it's a calorie-dense dish, the saltimbocca is surprisingly light, the sauce thin and simple, rich in flavor, but not overly heavy. Hadjian's pizza is no pie, but it is flavorful, made with oven-cooked tomato sauce and a simple selection of authentic ingredients, many of which are sourced directly from Italy.

"I work on all the recipes myself," said Hadjian. "I have an extensive knowledge of Italian food and try to keep it as authentic as possible, as fresh as possible, and as simple as possible. That's really Italian food. We make it really rustic and really simple, but fresh."

Hadjian hopes that his Orinda space will offer both a relaxed atmosphere and a bit of a sports bar, something for families, couples, students and seniors. "That's why I call it a tavern. It's a casual setting, but we make everything from scratch, so it's fine food, good quality food, but very homey and rustic."

Ultimately what Hadjian wants to offer Lamorindans is an eatery they can brag about and one that they return to. "What we hope for is that you as a resident are proud of your local place," said Hadjian, who anticipates loyal return-customers to supplement curious new visitors. "That's what keeps us going. That's the kind of reward that you want. The same faces coming back."

Taverna Pellegrini
65 Moraga Way, Orinda

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Petrole sole with lemon caper sauce



Scaloppini all Piccata (pork scaloppini with lemon caper sauce)



Pasta Carbonara



Spinach cheese ravioli in pesto sauce



Squash ravioli with butter sage sauce

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