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Specialties of the House: The Hunt for Happy Hour

By A.K. Carroll



Photos A.K. Carroll

This week's Hunt for Happy Hour, which brings you the freshest and finest when it comes to discounted beverages and premium small bites in the Lamorinda area, focuses on La Finestra, a Sicilian dining spot with old-world charm and classic cocktails.

Recently, I have been watching *The Dick Van Dyke Show* - light-hearted, black and white, 1960s television. I watch Laura Petrie prance around her suburban New York bungalow, baking cakes and shredding cabbage, making coffee in pedal pushers and a sweater. Something about this version of life seems simple, straightforward, classic. It is the same sort of classic I feel when I pass through the light-trimmed archway that leads to La Finestra. It is not trendy or hipster chic. There are no brass-studded chairs, tiny pots of succulents or a reclaimed wood bar. In fact, there is no bar at all. What it does have, however, is old-school charm along with an air of old-world Italy.

The best feature of happy hour at La Finestra is the restaurant itself. Photos, paintings and prints of the Italian peninsula fill the walls, along with framed maps of the region and gold-trimmed mirrors flanked in green shutters. The emerald trim is flaking and worn, a little like Italy itself, where you'll find more character and care than you will sleek shellac or stuck-up service. Opened by owner

Jeff Assadi and Sicily-native Andrea Ditta in 1999, La Finestra is the sort of restaurant that has a banquet room rather than a lounge and an ambiance that calls for classic piano.

There are other throwbacks as well - servers clad in white shirts and black pants, Lucinda script menus and white-clothed tables. It is a respectful sort of formality that is consistent throughout the service. Now open seven days a week, with the recent addition of a weekend brunch, La Finestra features a happy hour that lasts the length of the afternoon, starting at 2 p.m. and running until 5:30 p.m. All beer, wine and cocktails are discounted by \$2, from a cold bottle of Stella to a spicy glass of Toscolo Chianti. Cocktails are simple, but clean - no home-made lavender syrup, smoked bourbon, or fruit-infused spirits to be found. A tart, crisp cosmo is made with cranberry, vodka and triple sec, while the house mimosa (only \$6 during happy hour) features fresh-squeezed orange juice whose pulp dances on bubbles.

Drinks can be enjoyed throughout the restaurant, on the mosaic tables out front, or in the glints of sunlight found on the quaint side patio. "We don't have a bar or a television," says Assadi. "To me when you have food and wine and cocktails, you don't want distraction." Happy hour is strictly for drinks, though if you're feeling a bit peckish, Assadi recommends the scalene, an abalone and sea scallop patty served in garlic cream sauce, or the jumbo prawns sautéed with pine nuts and raisins and served on a crostini. There is also the restaurant's trademark wild mushroom and sun-dried tomato polenta.

Close the keyboard and put away your phone. Order yourself an afternoon mimosa or pre-dinner drink and take a trip back to the classic simplicity of cocktail hour.



When: 2-5:30 pm, Monday-Sunday Where: 100 Lafayette Cir #101, Lafayette Drinks: \$2 off all beer, wine and cocktails Recommended: \$8 Cosmopolitan and \$6 Fresh-squeezed Mimosa

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