Michael's Pizzeria

Real Fresh, Real Italian

By: Deborah Liv Johnson

Italy has arrived in Rancho Mirage, fresh from the belly of an 850 degree oven — picture a hand-thrown, bubbled crust pizza dressed in tomato, mozzarella, basil and extra virgin olive oil. The classic taste of fresh ingredients, housemade sausage and gnocchi is behind the doors of a new restaurant called Michael's Pizzeria.

A few of the favorites at Michael's: pizza with clams, Anjou pear salad, and the roasted vegetables.

The restaurant opened in July 2012 at The River in Rancho Mirage, a "sibling" of Michael's on Naples Ristorante, and of the first Michael's Pizzeria, both of which are based in Long Beach. Angelenos and Long Beach patrons can't get enough of these Italian treasures — Michael's on Naples and Michael's Pizzeria were named Zagat ® Guide 2013 best Italian restaurant and best pizza in Los Angeles, respectively.

Michael's desert location has already garnered a loyal following. General Manager Pietro Luca Bordignon, born and raised in Italy, is delighted to share his knowledge of all things Italian. "My passion for food comes from family," explains Bordignon. "My grandmother was a chef and everything she made was absolutely fresh and delicious."

The Michael's restaurants are owned by founder Michael Dene, Carl Dene, Massimo Aronne and Martin Howard. Executive Chef David Coleman creates the menus for each location.

"One of the best compliments we get is when customers tell us they feel like they're eating in Italy," says Bordignon. "We want them to experience real Italian food."

The menu changes according to what is grown locally and available. Part of eating healthy, especially when eating out, is choosing food with fresh ingredients and minimal processing, and few — if any — preservatives. Using local, seasonal fruits and vegetables helps support local growers while promoting the benefits of eating what's fresh — from farm to fork.

The pizza dough and bread are made fresh daily with imported Italian flour and baked in a wood-fired oven, also imported from Italy. Napoli-style pizza cooks in just 90 seconds with the average oven temperature rising to 850 degrees. The house

Executive Chef David Coleman, left, and General Manager Pietro Luca Bordignon

bread is made from pizza dough that proofs overnight and is baked each morning in a "cooled" 500-degree oven. Once the bread has finished baking, the oven is fueled with Calabria olive wood, which burns long and hot, until the oven once again reaches 850 degrees.

Stretching 40 to 60 pounds of house-made mozzarella each day, Michael's uses the fresh cheese for their signature Margherita D.O.P. (Denomination of Origin Protected) pizzas, as well as in their housemade lasagna.

In addition to Napoli-style pizza, Michael's offers a variety of delicious options that cater to most diets — from small bites on the antipasti menu featuring farmer's market vegetables and specialties like arancini oxtail and saffron to savory salads with such delectable ingredients as shaved fennel, artichokes, goat cheese, pine nuts and arugula or winter root vegetables, pancetta and roasted pumpkin seeds. Entrees feature a host of fresh ingredients — with several choices for vegetarians. And for that occasional splurge, dessert options are made in-house daily, including house-made gelato and an unforgettable almond cake with rosemary sauce, among other choices.

Berkeley resident David McMullen, a recent visitor to Michael's Pizzeria, couldn't help but gush about the gnocchi with braised oxtail. "It's like they reached up and scooped out a bit of heaven."
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