

# Piccola Casa Restaurant

## FINE STAR DINING EXPERIENCE IN SPRINGTOWN

There are few spots in the Tri Valley Region that one is less likely to find a five star dining experience than the strip mall on Bluebell Drive behind the Springtown Inn.

Somehow, owners George Magallon and Salvador Zaragozza have created an oasis of fine dining in an area otherwise noted for dry cleaning, cramped grocery shopping and inexpensive Vietnamese food. Their Piccola Casa restaurant delights the palate from soups and salads to creative entrees and rich desserts, with a Mediterranean flair unique to Livermore.

This is the first restaurant Magallon and Zaragozza have owned following a combined three decades of experience in nearly every element of the food business. It is open seven days a week for dinner and Monday through Friday for lunch. "Ownership was the only way left for us to grow," Magallon said. "We had done nearly everything."

Magallon came to the US from Mexico at age 16 and found work as a dishwasher at the Farm House Restaurant in Redwood City. Within three months he was promoted to cook, and during the next year he worked his way up to chef, sous chef, and then executive chef.

Magallon spent eight years at Farm House before moving on to the Ebener Group for which he opened seven restaurants in 16 years. During that period he also studied at the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco where he learned the business working of the restaurant industry and honed his cooking skills. He graduated with the academy's Executive Chef designation.

Zaragozza spent more than 20 years in the catering business and works with Magallon in the kitchen while running Piccola Casa's offsite corporate and private residence dining division. "We'll visit nearly anyplace with ten people or more and put on a meal you'll never forget," Magallon said.

Their experience, flair and expertise showed in every dish sampled by the Independent during a lunchtime visit in early May. We began our meal with a cup of creamy and luscious roasted red pepper soup that coated the tongue and saturated it with flavor. A large bowl of that soup with some bread would make a hearty lunch any time of the year.

Our little group, though, was just getting started. We followed the soup with the fried calamari appetizer that also featured artichoke hearts and two distinct dipping sauces. One was a traditional seafood cocktail sauce with a little extra pepper, and the other was a creamy chipotle aioli sauce that gave the calamari and artichokes a biting personality and turned a common dish into something much more unique.

There was nothing common about the salad we tried which featured a bed of baby greens, sliced tomatoes and snow peas under asparagus wrapped with prosciutto. The salad was lightly sprayed with a parmesan and truffle oil that brought out every ounce of flavor. Portions were generous, and there was already some capacity-related groaning from some members of our party before the main course arrived.

Our entrée featured prawns stuffed with Dungeness crab, Pacific Ocean scallops smothered in a light butter sauce, and lime risotto with scallops. The kitchen performed the neat trick of allowing the prawns to stand up for themselves against the comparatively rich crab stuffing, and seasoning the risotto so the contributions made by the lime and scallions came through loud and clear. The buttery scallops stood out, even amongst this august company, and were called by one guest the best seafood she had ever tried. This combination is offered for \$18 per plate.

According to Magallon, all the meat and seafood at Piccola Casa comes in fresh every day. The meat is selected with enough marbling for flavor without becoming too fatty, while the fish is brought in daily from the Pacific Ocean. Magallon also said that

his meat is purchased from wild stock without any forced farm feeding and is never frozen.

For dessert we sampled a warm chocolate brownie garnished with macadamia nuts, custard, sliced strawberries and caramel. This concoction sat under a large scoop of vanilla bean ice cream drizzled with chocolate sauce. The juxtaposition of the warm brownie with the ice cream was more than satisfying, and filling the fork with the garnish together and separately gave guests the feeling of enjoying more than one treat, all for \$4.95.

Our other dessert was a Fiji apple-dried cherry crisp that was a bit lighter than the brownie. The fruit crisp was sweet and tart, and was complimented nicely with a smaller scoop of vanilla bean ice cream and some thin wisps of caramel, for \$6.

Piccola Casa also offers sandwiches for \$6-\$9, and a wide variety of pastas and entrees that range from \$8 to \$14. Its bar serves beer and wine. Magallon says he plans to add some outdoor tables this summer with a view of the Springtown Golf Course.

Magallon and Zaragozza are anxious to please and are often seen visiting diners and taking suggestions. They change about 15 per cent of their menu every two weeks, giving regular patrons the opportunity for a new experience with every visit.

