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Stories

Andiamo

Whether they're a couple on a first date or parents craving some grown-up time, Detroit-area residents find the food and atmosphere they need at the city's 10 Andiamo restaurants. From Andiamo Italia in Warren to Andiamo Osteria in Royal Oak, the full-service Italian restaurants offer authentic Italian dishes in a fine-dining atmosphere.

The driving force behind the restaurants is Joseph Vicari, president and CEO of Andiamo Restaurant Group. Vicari bought his first restaurant, Lido on the Lake in St. Clair Shores, in January of 1990, and in October of that year, followed with Andiamo Italia in Warren. From that point on, Vicari steadily grew the Andiamo empire, opening restaurants in 1993, 1996, 1999 and 2000, and all the while expanding and fine-tuning existing operations.

Andiamo Restaurant Group and Keating of Chicago, both family-owned businesses, partner to bring Detroit-area diners the 'true taste of Italy.'

Pictured (left to right): Jim Schulte, Keating of Chicago, Eliza Keating, President, Keating of Chicago, Joseph Vicari, President/CEO, Andiamo Restaurant Group, Chef Aldo Ottaviani, Andiamo Restaurant Group, Eliza Ann Keating, Keating of Chicago

Vicari has had more than a little help from Aldo Ottaviani, known more familiarly as Chef Aldo. Chef Aldo, a native Italian who moved to the United States after World War II,

owned a gourmet restaurant on Detroit's East Side for 40 years. "It was a very popular restaurant—reservations only," Vicari says.

Chef Aldo retired in 1989 at the age of 70. When Vicari opened Andiamo Italia in Warren, he asked Chef Aldo to come out of retirement and show Vicari's younger chefs a thing or two about Italian food.

Chef Aldo agreed, with plans to stay "only a month or two to get us going," Vicari recalls. Fifteen years later, the chef is still on board, traveling from restaurant to restaurant to oversee quality and help create special dishes.

The Andiamo restaurants in the Detroit metro area keep Chef Aldo and Vicari busy—as well as Vicari's wife, who runs Andiamo Italian Bistro in Sterling Heights. The locations — in Warren, Grosse Pointe and Grosse Pointe Woods, Bloomfield Hills, Rochester, Royal Oak, Clinton Township, Dearborn and downtown Detroit — serve 20,000 meals a week.

The restaurants are popular with Detroit residents. Seventy-five percent of Andiamo's customers are locals; however, the locations in Dearborn and downtown see a fair number of out-of-town guests due to their proximity to big hotels. Locals also like to entertain business guests and visiting family members at Andiamo, Vicari reports.



"Serving Those Who Serve The Very Best"



Overall, Andiamo is an adult experience: “We’re not a kid/family type of restaurant,” Vicari says.

In the classic Italian style, the menus offer antipasti, salads, soup and bruschetta, as well as fish, poultry, veal and meat courses. Pastas, of course, comprise a healthy portion of the menu mix. Vicari names Gnocchi Alla Aldo, with tomato or meat sauce (\$14) and Ravioli Alla Genovese (pasta pillows stuffed with meat, spinach and cheeses, \$16) as two of the best-selling dishes.

The gnocchi and ravioli, along with the restaurants’ other fresh pastas, are made in the commissary kitchen at the Warren location and shipped to the restaurants two or three times each week. Desserts are also made at the commissary.



Chef Aldo of Andiamo using a Keating Custom Pasta System pasta cooker. Each Andiamo location has at least one Keating Custom Pasta cooker in its kitchen.

Each kitchen contains two or three gas-fired, fourteen-inch Keating pasta cookers, which Vicari prizes for their quick recovery time and ability to turn out perfectly cooked pasta. “Our restaurants are high-volume,” Vicari explains. “The pasta cookers continue to perform under stress.”

Chef Aldo used an Italian brand of pasta cooker until he was persuaded to try a Keating model. Vicari says that the chef was instantly sold on the Keating cooker: “He found that Keating was a better solution.”

Most restaurateurs would be pleased to be standing in Vicari’s shoes. His restaurants, each of which holds 150 to 300 seats, average a \$37 per-person tab at dinner, wine included.

The location in Warren is also home to Andiamo Showroom, a dinner-and-entertainment spot featuring national acts such as Howie Mandel and Regis Philbin.

Still, Vicari is hardly ready to retire. In the last two years, he’s opened four new locations, and will spend 2006 in a holding pattern. Then it’ll be time to expand again, most likely to Lansing and



The Andiamo Second City location on a busy evening.

Ann Arbor, Mich., and then beyond Michigan’s boundaries within the next five years. Expansion via franchising or with a partner is not out of the question, “but we will somehow stay company owned,” Vicari promises.

And he promises that Keating pasta cookers will find a home in every kitchen, because of their superb performance, of course, but also because of their provenance. Just as the Andiamo restaurants are family-owned, so is Keating.

“I didn’t realize that Keating was a family-owned business until the family came in to see our business,” Vicari says. For him, that’s good news. “We would like to do business with people who are hard-working Americans.”

Philip Nicolai writes frequently about restaurants and the hospitality industry.



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