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Oracle eatery all about comfort

Happy customers give owner/chef 'ultimate rush'

By Sarah J. Bell

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It's like going to dinner at your grandma's house - if your grandma was a gourmet Italian cook.

Frank and Angelina Palazzolo, owners of Nonna Maria's Ristorante in Oracle, said their restaurant is designed with comfort and comfort food in mind.

"This place is an extension of our home," said Angelina Palazzolo.

Growing up in both Sicily and Illinois, Frank Palazzolo was always surrounded by the restaurant business. For a time he even lived with his family in the basement of one of their restaurants.

A casual atmosphere with upscale touches, makes Nonna Maria's attractive to families, lunching workers, tourists passing through or couples looking for a romantic date place.

Like an Italian villa, a fountain and columns welcome visitors and warm colors radiate inside and out. The location was chosen because its views are like that of the Sicilian countryside, Frank Palazzolo said.

Family pictures and Frank Palazzolo's paintings adorn the walls. Windows are dominant because of the mountain and sunset views.

"You can see from Picacho Peak to the chairlift on Mount Lemmon," Frank Palazzolo said of Nonna's al fresco patio.

Nonna Maria's bears the name of his grandmother because she inspired the recipes.

"As a little kid I can remember standing on a chair next to my grandma as she stirred the sauce," Frank said. "She'd put a little in a cup so I could taste it - that's how I still do it to this day."

Nonna Maria's started as a carry-out joint in an Oracle strip mall and has grown to a new restaurant with a dining room that can accommodate more than 100 - with room to grow.

"If it wasn't for the food we wouldn't be here," said Frank Palazzolo as he gestured to the expansive dining area.

The menu features pizzas, sandwiches and calzones with fresh ingredients. Pasta dishes like shrimp aglio e olio - shrimp, garlic and olive oil tossed with linguine - and classic spaghetti tutto carne with Italian sausage and meatballs are popular with customers.

Off-the-menu and lunch specials are offered including dinners for two.

Italian wine and beers as well as domestic selections are offered at Nonna Maria's bar. Coffee, cappuccino, espresso and soft drinks including authentic orange and lemon Italian sodas are available.

As a self-described perfectionist, Frank is always in the kitchen and said he feels the "ultimate rush" when

If you go

- Where: Nonna Maria's Ristorante, 2161 Rockcliff Blvd., Oracle
- What: Homemade Italian dishes including pasta, calzones, pizza and sandwiches with a comfortable atmosphere and incredible view.
- Hours: Open Tuesday through Thursday, 11 a.m. until 9 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 11 a.m. until 10 p.m. and Sunday, 11 a.m. until 9 p.m.; closed Monday.
- Prices: Entrees average \$7 to \$11, pizzas \$7.50 to \$19.50 depending on size and toppings.

customers enjoy the food.

"I'm hooked on the calzones," said Jim Sandefer, a SaddleBrooke resident who also enjoys the comfortable atmosphere and friendly service.

Jeff Simminger of Tempe stopped into Nonna Maria's during a trip to Oracle. He said he had visited before and liked the pizza.

"This place is atypical of Oracle, but it still has the friendly service and the small-town atmosphere."

Movie stars and government officials have even enjoyed Nonna Maria's offerings. William Shatner once ordered a veggie pizza when Nonna Maria's catered an event at Biosphere 2. Gov. Janet Napolitano has stopped in during her gubernatorial campaign.

Tucson resident Manny Coronado buys pizza at Nonna Maria's and takes it home after working in Oracle.

Nonna Maria's also offers catering including the "mangia, mangia," a 30-inch pizza that feeds 15 to 20 hungry people, Frank Palazzolo said.

"I'm not sure who has the biggest pizza but I think I do."

Menu items are affordable as Frank and Angelina's motto is giving customers the best quality at a great price.

"We don't use scales and we don't count pepperonis," Frank Palazzolo said as he prepared a pizza stacked high with fresh toppings. "This food takes people back to their roots."

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