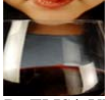


Restaurant Review: Andiamo in Haworth

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True story: It was 4 a.m. and Don Dickstein was awake in front of the TV. He was about to open an Italian restaurant, and it was still nameless. So there he was, watching Pee-Wee Herman be seduced by an Italian actress. "Pee-Wee, andiamo, andiamo, make love to me," she said, using the Italian for "let's go."

Dickstein woke up his wife, Linda, and announced: "We have a name."

That was 1990. Today, Andiamo is one of [Bergen County's](#) best-known Italian dining spots - and not just for its annual charity motorcycle run. It could practically serve as a blueprint for how to operate a successful family restaurant:

First, understand that owning a restaurant is a lifestyle, and wait until your children are older before diving in. (Son Alan now runs the front of the house with his father.)

Make sure you enjoy what you do - Don Dickstein's gregarious personality makes him a natural in the dining room. (He used to be an auctioneer.)

Design a menu of Italian favorites but offer a changing list of blackboard specials that keep regulars coming back for one of the 160 seats.

And, when you become so frustrated with your chef that you wind up firing him in the middle of a busy dinner service, give your wife a shot.

"Linda looked at me: 'You gotta let me try this. I know I can do it.' " Dickstein told her: "You've got a month."

That was 16 years ago. Linda Dickstein has been Andiamo's chef ever since, thanks to a knack for flavors and replicating dishes (she has very little formal culinary training). Her kitchen prides itself on its ingredients - such as prime wet-aged steaks; free-range roast chicken; and even the basket of bread, crostini and tomato sauce, all made in-house from scratch.

But she's become known for her blackboard specials, which change every Tuesday and are detailed in a recording if you call the restaurant (the family sees many of the same numbers on caller ID each week). Specials are not repeated more than twice a year, though Linda's famous meatloaf may make three annual appearances.

Salads are a specialty, and the one on the blackboard the night we visited sounded like just a little bit too much: endive, string beans, oranges, candied walnuts, dates, champagne vinaigrette (\$9.75). But it was a sweet, colorful medley of fresh ingredients.

There are generally a couple of pasta specials. We tried two on different weeks, and wished that one were a regular item: hot and sweet sausage crumbled into spaghetti with tomato, red peppers, broccoli rabe and smoked mozzarella (\$22.50). But then there was the linguine special filled with overcooked scallops and lobster, a waste of \$28.

When I ordered the lamb chop special, the waiter swooned, "You're going to love it." It wasn't just lamb chops - these two were charred 2-inch-thick porterhouse chops, robustly flavored and tender as filet mignon, accented by a light balsamic glaze, worthy of the \$34.50 price tag. And \$13.95 for stuffed mushrooms seemed high, though they arrived stuffed with chunks of excellent crabmeat.

The menu items we tried all had elements that were surprisingly light. On "Linda's Special" pizza, which combined scallions, plum tomatoes and fresh basil, it was the soft, paper-thin crust (\$18.50). On a simple plate of bruschetta with gorgeous tomatoes, it was the toast underneath (\$5.95). And for the fried calamari (\$12.95), made with fresh squid, it was the flour coating. When we couldn't decide whether we wanted a marinara or fra diavolo dipping sauce, our waiter indulged us with both, though we could barely pick out which one was supposed to be spicy.

Dessert hits: a special of a perfect pear crisp under a monster scoop of vanilla ice cream and a downright dreamy chocolate pudding cake (both \$8.95). Misses: mushy, soggy tiramisù¹ (\$8) and a buttermilk doughnut special that mostly just resulted in powdered sugar flying everywhere (\$8.95). (When the hungry table next to us coveted the doughnuts, we pointed them to the pudding cake.)

If you come on a slow night, try to be seated in one of the little rooms near the entrance, which offer a more intimate feel. The big main dining room can grow quite loud when busy and becomes a sea of waiters, who expertly tag team and pick up one another's slack. They make up in charm what the restaurant may lack in promptness on a bustling night, when you should come expecting a leisurely dinner.

Wherever you sit, you'll almost certainly spot Don Dickstein, in a blazer and earring. "I can forget a name easily but I'll remember where the people sat, what they ate and what they drank." And he'll be there to greet them with some friendly banter and a smile that still comes easily after two decades.

Andiamo - Two and 1/2 stars

23 Hardenburgh Ave., Haworth |201-384-1551|andiamorestaurant.net

Food: Italian, with both classic and creative dishes and some international influences.

Ambience: Friendly, busy Italian restaurant in residential neighborhood.

Service: Charming and solicitous, though can be slow on busy nights.

Value: Some prices on the high side, though justified by ingredients in some cases. Appetizers \$5.75 to \$15.50, entrées \$15.95 to \$36.95.

Would be good for: Family dinner.

Less appropriate for: Anyone looking for lower prices or a more sedate atmosphere.

Recommended dishes: Blackboard specials, calamari, "Linda's Special" pizza, chocolate pudding cake.

Hours: Lunch: 11:45 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Tuesday through Friday. Dinner: 5 to 10 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 5 to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 5 to 9:30 p.m. Sunday. Bar open later.

Liquor, wine: Full bar, wine list with an emphasis on California, particularly cabernet.

Noise level: Depends on where you sit and how crowded the restaurant is. Festively loud when busy.

Credit cards: AE, MC, V.

Reservations: Accepted for parties of five or more.

Accommodations for children: Menu, highchairs.

Dress: Neat casual.

Early-bird specials or deals: No.

Takeout: Yes, and delivery Sunday through Thursday.

Parking: Lot. Valet on weekends in winter.

Reviewed: April 1, 2011.

About the ratings:

No stars - Poor

One star - Fair

Two stars - Good

Three stars - Excellent

Four stars - Outstanding