

R RESTAURANTS

Tips on dining out
in the Orlando area

Roma Ristorante earns PASTA approval

By JAMES PONTI
FOR THE WEEKLY

A local newspaper recently polled its readers and found the Olive Garden to be the most popular Italian restaurant in the area. Why not call McDonald's the best Irish restaurant while you're at it?

The Olive Garden is a fine restaurant. They have good salad and breadsticks and provide plenty of jobs in the area. But it's as Italian as ketchup and noodles. It's part of a conglomerate that also owns Red Lobster and China Coast. These people are businessmen, not part of the famiglia.

Therefore, it is my duty to explain to you how you can tell a *real* Italian restaurant. Our reference restaurant is Roma Ristorante Italiano, which is located just south of Apopka on Highway 441. I am using Roma because it follows all five rules of PASTA (Ponti's Authenticity Seeking Test for Americans).

Rule 1: An Italian restaurant should be owned and operated by someone (preferably an entire family) who is actually Italian. You wouldn't buy a burger from a vegetarian and shouldn't order



— Photo by Erika Goodwin

ROMA RISTORANTE: an authentic Italian experience in Apopka.

lasagna made by someone named Johnson. Roma Ristorante is owned by Maria Violante.

Rule 2: When you open the door of an Italian restaurant, the first thing you should see is a cash register manned by a member of the family. At Roma, my wife and I were met at the door by Mrs. Violante's son-in-law, Armando Bonaduce, who runs the restaurant along with Maria's daughter, Joanna Hamlin.

Rule 3: An actual Italian restaurant is required by the Knights of Columbus to have cheesy pictures of famous Italian landmarks. Not only does the Roma have the pictures, it also has a ceramic replica of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, which is nice considering that I was born in the neighboring town of Marina de Pisa.

Rule 4: The silverware in an Italian restaurant isn't supposed to match. Matching silverware

means that you're paying too much. Silverware from garage sales means that all the money's going into the food. Of the four forks at our table, no two were from the same set.

Rule 5: An Italian restaurant must have a section dedicated to photographs of family members and celebrities. A wall at Roma sports a very large picture of Mrs. Violante's father, as well as autographed shots of Cliff Robertson (because he portrayed Catholic President John F. Kennedy in "P.T. 109") and Steve Rondinaro (Sinatra he ain't, but at least his name ends in a vowel).

Having qualified with regard to the PASTA criterion, it was time to try the food. I ordered a combination that included lasagna, manicotti and eggplant (\$10.95). My wife, Germanic blood coursing through her veins, ordered the only thing that she's ever ordered at an Italian restaurant: lasagna (\$9.95).

The entrees were better than most but not quite as good as Mama's. My only complaint, and it's a small one, is that my combination was served together, so

ROMA RISTORANTE ITALIANO

Food: ★★★1/2
Ambience: ★★★
Service: ★★★

(Out of five)

Homemade spumoni and pastas are the stuff of Italy

Address: 730 S. Orange Blossom Trail, Apopka

Phone: 886-2360

Prices: \$8-\$12

Cards: MC, V

that it was like a single item instead of three. The homemade minestrone (\$2.50 a bowl) was okay, but the cheese bread could not have been better.

Mrs. Violante knows that the key to a great opera is the ending, and she uses this principle with her meals. The spumoni (\$2.25) served after dinner was unrivaled. Like the bread and most of the pasta, the spumoni is homemade.

If you're tired of pseudo-Italian, I recommend a visit to Roma Ristorante. The drive to Apopka gives you enough time to listen to a little Vivaldi on the way over.