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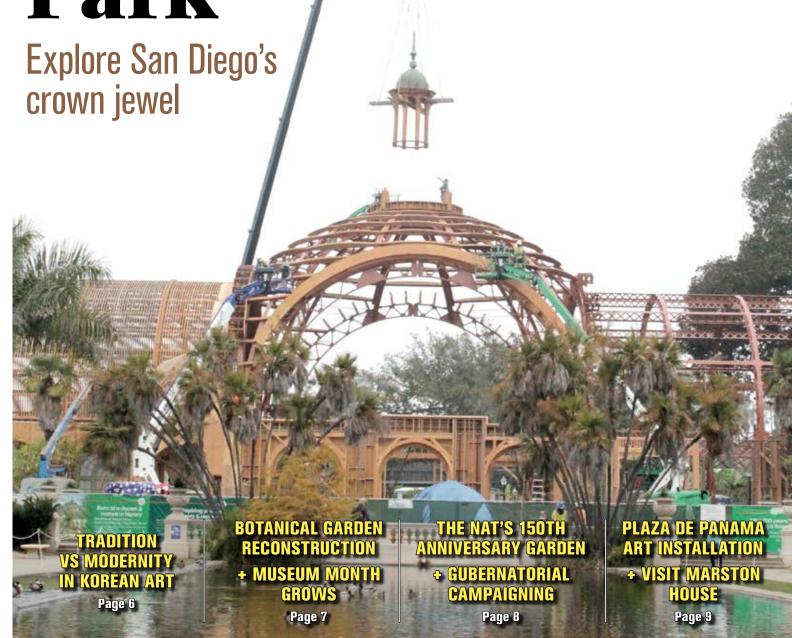
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Vast 'pastabilities' and an amusing cheese wheel



It was four years ago in early February when a trio of Sicilian transplants opened their warmly appointed RustiCucina restaurant on Park Boulevard. Only a short time later, however, Covid hit and the public would have to wait a while before enjoying the full experience at the much-anticipated newcomer.

The double-storefront space was previously home to Pardon My French, and Heat Bar & Kitchen before that. It's a prime piece of property that comes with an inviting bar and outdoor patio.

A friend and I walked into a nearly full house on a recent weeknight. The atmosphere was convivial. Seated cozily between two other tables along a banquette, we arrived ravenous for pasta and wine.

A couple glasses of the latter was love at first sip—a house blend of Cabernet and Chanti. Smooth, easy and juicy it was.

The culinary slant here claims to focus on the merging of American and Sicilian cooking



An appetizer of three meatballs

styles. At some points throughout our meal we made the connection. At other times we didn't.

Vibrant marinara sauce cloaking an appetizer of three sizable meatballs made of beef and pork was stamped with classic Sicilian flair. The balls themselves were much denser than I prefer, but with trusty flavor thanks in part to drizzles of tangy "Parmesan fondue" on top.

Our second appetizer was an attractive plate of Sicilian artichoke hearts attached to their long stems for easy handling. They were delectable on their own minus the pond of lemon-garlic sauce in which they were served. We couldn't detect the citrus or the garlic in the sauce no matter how hard we tried. With such beautiful chokes at hand, I fantasized about how they would have tasted simply grilled, with just a spritz of fresh lemon to boot.

A wheel of imported Parmesan cheese weighing at least 80 pounds comes into play for the daily pasta special. On this night, it was house-made rigatoni in white-wine cream sauce and with crumbled Calabrian sausage strewn throughout.

The wheel is partly hollowed out to create a bowl shape in the



Spaghetti carbonara

RUSTICUCINA

3797 Park Blvd., Hillcrest 619-310-5291, www.rusticucina.com

Prices: Appetizers, soups and salads, \$10 to \$20; build your own pasta, \$21 to \$28; cheese wheel pasta (changes daily), market price; entrees, \$24 to \$39.

center. It's carted to your table and blow-torched for a minute until the middle and sides become melty. Then, the already-prepared pasta dish parked alongside gets dropped into the wheel for a vigorous swirling.

We loved the presentation. Everyone does. The pasta successfully picked up the cheesiness from the wheel, thus adding unforeseen heft to the rigatoni, which was already cloaked in cream sauce and oil from the sausage.

The dish was impossible to finish as our waitress pointed out later that most of the cheese-wheel specials are made with cream sauces (more typically found in northern Italy than Sicily) and that many customers split the orders and augment them with a lighter dish or salad.



Sicilian artichoke hearts



RustiCucina's warmly appointed dining room (Photos by Frank Sabatini Jr.)

With better foresight, I would have chosen differently when crafting our second entree from the fun "build-your-own-pasta" section of the menu. In doing so, you first select a cut of pasta from about seven choices and then pair it to one of five different sauces. I chose spaghetti with carbonara sauce, which hails from Italy's west-central Lazio region, a considerable distance from Sicily.

The fully cooked spaghetti had the faintest chew, exactly how I like it. And the carbonara was classic with its blend of egg yolk,



Rigatoni tossed in the cheese wheel

pecorino cheese and rendered fat from guanciale (pork cheek). Thankfully the kitchen omits the cream, which is often used in Americanized versions. Needless to say, this too was a heavy dish, although expected, as it contained generous pieces of the pork, not to mention a better depth of flavor compared to our rigatoni entree.

Outside of RustiCucina's numerous pasta choices, the menu extends to dishes such as lamb ossobuco; braised short ribs with Parmesan-mushroom risotto; lobster ravioli; lasagna bolognese; and more

For dessert, outsourced limoncello cake layered with mascarpone cheese took the lead for us over tiramisu, crème brulee, cannoli and chocolate lava cake. I've had this exact cake before and adore its fluffiness and tang—and bits of lemon peel hiding within. It was the perfect palate cleanser after our ultra-caloric dinner.





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