

(First appeared on VisitNC.com)

A European vacation may be out of reach, but the purest tastes of Italy can easily be found at LaRiserva Ristorante in the Appalachia foothills of Hendersonville, NC. Owner and chef David Sparacino has created a menu of such expansive Italian flavors that visitors are wise to bring a map of both Italy and North Carolina along.

The dinner tour starts with a tasting platter of key ingredients imported directly from Italy, where the chef visits several times each year. Guests may individually taste a selection of olives, prosciutto, cured meats, olive oils or cheeses – or they may choose the “Taste of Four Seasons” sampler for variety. With flavors ranging from the salty seas of Sicily to the robust north, the “Four Seasons” platter is an education for the tongue and not for the faint of heart. A clean palette and a glass of Pinot Grigio from the restaurant’s wine cellar are suggested before diving in. Servers are glad to explain each origin of taste again should you forget after first round. Herb-infused bread, daily soup, salads, or six other antipasti appetizers such as bruschetta are also available for first course.

Order wine by the glass or bring a larger party to get a better sample from the chef’s cellar of over 200 bottles from around the world. Or, come back to the wine bar – separate from the dining room – to try more with a late night menu after another evening in historic downtown Hendersonville. The backdrop décor in hues of a Tuscan sunset alongside a street-front window make each sip a little sweeter.

Chef Sparacino also creates seasonal tasting menus of regional NC cuisine, which includes four courses for \$50 per person. His menu for Spring/Summer 2008, “From Sea to Land in Beautiful North Carolina,” was a “Best Dish in North Carolina 2008” finalist for the Fine Dining Category, a competition sponsored by the NC Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

To eat the traditional Italian way, order pasta from the regular menu as a second course, although LaRiserva’s pastas are enough to be had alone. However, the kitchen will split a pasta dish between two diners if requested, and still leave the plate full of pizzazz under a silver dome when brought to the table. The menu coyly describes the risotto as “prepared in rhythm with the seasons.” “Spaghetti alla Sparacino” includes a delicious “artisan-made” Kobe beef meatball. Classic Italian fair such as the “Linguine Aglio E Olio” will also get forks spinning.

If there is room – and do try to have room – order a third course entrée from the “Dalla Terra” menu. Here, Sparacino’s North Carolina influence shines. An herb-crusted rack of lamb is paired with creamy fingerling potatoes, so delicate they could be mistaken for gnocchi. Other meats hail from their NC farm origins – Ashley Farms (Winston-Salem) chicken and Maple Farms (Orange County) breast of duck.

The dessert menu is not unusual in scope, although execution makes each bite a delight. Keep it Italian to the very end with a spoonful of tiramisu, and ask for Richard who will gladly make a special dessert drink. Then, as the last ones to leave, you may just find yourself waving “ciao bellas” on your way out the door.

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Noteworthy Chef

Chef David Sparacino, 38, settled in Hendersonville with his wife Dale after traveling abroad and cooking in different restaurants across the state.

“I got tired of traveling and wanted to keep some roots here,” Sparacino said. “There’s a lot of talent in the Asheville area.”

Sparacino is the former executive chef at La Grotta Cucina d’Italia in Asheville, NC, and was featured in Food Network’s “Best Of” as the former executive chef at Bijoux Brasserie in Charlotte, NC.

If you get to have a chat with Sparacino, make sure to keep it brief. A fast talker, he has little time to spare. He can be found in the kitchen six days a week, in addition to the demands of a restaurant owner. At his last chef job, he missed only one dinner service in four years, and that was because he was too sick to cook.

The most impressive thing about Chef Sparacino is his culinary scope. Whereas most kitchens hire separate pastry chefs, bakers and sommeliers, Sparacino can do it all. He trained at the Cast-Ailementi School for Advanced Pastry Arts in Brescia, Italy and the L’Institute Paul Bocuse – Les Arte Culinaires in Lyon, France. Sparacino also graduated in Advanced Food and Wine Pairing from the Culinary Institute of America, and has been collecting wine as a hobby since he was a young boy.

Behind all the formal training, Sparacino comes from a family of cooks. His father owned several NC restaurants, including Sunny’s Sparacinos in Asheville, and Italian is the food they made at home.

“I’m Italian so my heart is in Italian ingredients.”

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Story by Emily A. Benton