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Verace Restaurant

INDULGE IN AUTHENTIC ITALIAN FOOD AND HOSPITALITY

by Barbara Ramsay-Orr

Stepping into the warmth of Verace from the chill of a Canadian winter feels like walking into a big Italian hug. The sense of welcome and comfort is immediate.

That, in essence, is what the owners are aiming for and they have hit the mark. Verace (rhymes with Liberace) is a restaurant that aims to celebrate the authentic Italian dining experience, ensuring that everything – from the quality of ingredients to the warm welcoming – is true to the culture.

Owner Tomo Kovacek also owns Pizza E Pazzi on St. Clair Ave. in Toronto, which often saw visitors hailing from Oakville in search of authentic Italian food. That prompted Kovacek to explore Oakville where, incidentally, his business partner Aleksandra Popovic is from. Together, they found the property that had most recently been Ricarda's Restaurant, and before that Ristorante Julia. It seemed like the perfect property for what they wanted,

boasting a fresh and spacious interior and a generously sized outdoor patio.

Verace opened its doors on August 27, 2021, bringing with it a real slice of Italy – both figuratively and literally. The Napoli Pizza on the menu is actually awaiting its certification of authenticity from the governing body of Neapolitan Pizza, the Associazione Vera Pizza Napoletana. The organization is dedicated to preserving the culture of the Neapolitan Pizza. No surprise then, a restaurant must meet very high standards to receive certification (Pizza E Pazzi is already certified by the AVPN).

"All of my ingredients are imported from Italy," Tomo tells me. "The flour is '00' from Italy, the tomatoes are San Marzanos, the mozzarella is fresh.

"There is nothing wrong with Canadian ingredients, don't get me wrong!" he explains. "But to be authentically Neapolitan Pizza, the ingredients have to be traditional ones."

Pride of place in Verace is given to the impressive wood-burning pizza oven, an Acunto oven, hand built in Italy by the family that has been

making these ovens since 1892. It reaches temperatures of 900 degrees. "It's so fast," Tomo tells me. "A pizza is cooked in 90 seconds."

His recipe produces that smoky, droopy slice that is typical of Napoli pizza, that remind me of the slices that actress Julia Roberts downed in a Naples restaurant, as the character Elizabeth Gilbert, in the movie *Eat Pray Love*.

Tomo is Croatian but he went to culinary school very close to the Italian border and his classes were dominated by Italian cuisine.

With his business partner Aleksandra, he is working to bring that European dining culture to the area. "We are aiming for a true kind of hospitality that is more than just good food. It's about food but also about the vibe and the people who become regulars."

The restaurant is a fit for everybody – any kind of dress, any age. It is not fine dining, though it offers that quality, but is inclined more to family style with traditional recipes, simple and homemade, all from Italy. There are dishes from all areas of Italy such as pasta al a vongole from the south and rigatoni cap-



Photos courtesy Verace

rese from Abruzzo. There is a changing menu of pastas, including a mushroom ravioli, and gnocchi with San Marzano sauce, as well as specials each evening.

The night we are there, there is a seafood special, as well as a lamb main. There's also something for risotto fans, and, of course, several varieties of Napoli pizza. Tomo plans to celebrate the particular cuisines of different areas of Italy throughout the year, featuring black truffles when in season, or the unique dishes of Abruzzo.

Desserts are a litany of sinful Italian indulgences, all made from scratch. Panna cotta, tiramisu, creme brulé, flourless chocolate cake, tartufanero and torta cassata are on the sweet menu, along with a selection of gelato made by Panto Gelato in Toronto.

The wine list is 95 per cent Italian, with lots of super Tuscans as well as Chianti, Montepulciano, and Pinot Grigio. There are aperitivos, a wide selection of Amaros and several high end grappas.

We start our meal by sidestepping the →





Photo: Verace



Verace owner Tomo Kovacek and business partner Aleksandra Popovic.
Photo: Jack Curran

→ aperitivos and indulging in the house signature drink, the Verace Sour, prepared brilliantly by mixologist Michaela. It has gin, Lille Blanc, Cointreau and lemon juice, gently mixed on ice and served with a fresh raspberry. The cocktail is light and refreshing to start the meal.

Portions are more than generous and can easily be shared plates. Beef carpaccio arrives arranged on a bed of arugula, sprinkled with fresh black pepper. Asparagus soup is hot and flavourful, gnocchi are little pillows of deliciousness, and the Neapolitan anchovy and black olive pizza is mouth watering. My favourite dish, is the kale salad, in which the greens have been massaged with lemon juice and olive oil then adorned with slices of watermelon radish, pine nuts, little currants and pecorino cheese. It's a fine balance of savoury and sweet.

Tiramisu completes the dinner accompanied by two small glasses of amaro which our waiter, Carlos, explains are a traditional <digestivo> enjoyed at the end of a good meal.

“Our goal is to serve food which is, how do →



Photos: Verace



→ you say, done with quality not price,” explains Tomo. “It is not just about the food, but also about the ambiance. Many of our customers know each other, and it sometimes feels like a social gathering here.”

As we dine, a gentleman comes in and sits at the bar where he is greeted by Michaela, orders a glass of wine and dines leisurely and comfortably alone. It’s clear that Verace can easily become a regular place for locals.

Aleksandra takes me on a tour of the new events space, just being completed. It is an airy, white room that seats up to 80.

“Tomo is originally Croatian and I am Serbian,” Aleksandra says. “We come from a culture that values spending time with family and friends. We have brought a bit of that very social culture here with Versace.”

Outside the windows, the patio tables are covered with snow. I imagine myself sitting at one of the tables in spring, sipping Italian wine with the sun beating down. I’m already planning my next visit. **W**