

Online Exclusive
Get a Great Camera Phone. FREE
WITH NEW 2-YR ACTIVATION

Free Overnight Shipping
NEXT FREE PHONE

verizon wireless
Shop Now

Search - Enter a Keyword -

Site Web Archives - Free since 1987 go



Living | Floridian

Print Email story Comment Email editor

Features

Extra saucy

The owners of Little Italy serve up Italian dishes with a madcap style that suits folks in this corner of old-timey Inverness.

By DAWN REISS
Published May 15, 2007



The Cali family (from left) Rosario, 4-year-old Gioia Mia, Donna and Alfredo, winds down after a Saturday dinner crowd.

[Times photo: Melissa Golden]

INVERNESS - Alfredo Cali stands behind a long glass deli counter filled with fresh mozzarella, prosciutto, cannoli and Italian cookies. His eyes dart behind his bright blue Armani glasses. His cue ball head bobbles.

Near Alfredo is a bright yellow plastic sign that says: *This is not Burger King. You don't get it your way. You take it my way or you don't get a (bleeping) thing.*

"Darling," Alfredo beckons a young woman close to the counter, as he climbs on top of a small wooden stool so he can reach her.

"It's so nice to see you," he says, planting loud kisses on her cheeks.

He scans the deli.

"Excuse me. Excuse me," he calls out to a table in the back. "Do you know who that table is reserved for?"

The stunned couple looks up from their paninis.

"That table is for couples who made love this morning."

"Did you make love this morning?"

The couple just stares for a second. Their

ADVERTISEMENT

Unlimited Text picture, and video messaging to over 60 million AT&T customers for only \$5 more a month.*

FIND A STORE

Red SYNC™ \$24.99**

Formerly Cingular

at&t



[Times photo: Melissa Golden]

A dolled-up Alfredo Cali serenades Katia Hampton during a Saturday night dinner at Little Italy. "Some people come in unhappy and my goal is to make them happy," he says.

Most emailed

- Med school at 54
- The wrong kind of closings
- Extra saucy
- North Bay Hospital unveils big plans for expanding
- 3 competing visions for Ybor factory

Floridian

- Extra saucy
- Diets are short-term solutions to weight loss
- Health line
- Med school at 54

Multimedia

It's Your Times

- I had a dream
- Bill Maxwell invites discussion on his column about teaching.



- Discuss local issues

Tampabay.com blog

- Tightlines



Your online fishing hole.

- More blogs

Subscribe to the Times

Click here for daily delivery of the St. Petersburg Times.

Email Newsletters

Be the first to know. Register for free breaking news alerts and morning headlines.

ADVERTISEMENT

AT&T Yahoo! High Speed Internet Pro

\$24.99/mo

GO FASTER

The new at&t

For residential customers. Comparison of major broadband providers.

faces turn red. Then the man replies: "Of course."

Tucked near the Citrus County courthouse is Little Italy of Inverness Deli. It would be at home in Miami, Tampa or Orlando. But it's an oddity here.

More Southern than Floridian, Inverness reflects an era that other parts of the state left behind decades ago. Confederate flags are plastered on pickups, hog hunting is huge and the nearest Starbucks or Target is more than 45 minutes away. It's home to high-end golf courses and manatees. *The Daily Show* has ridiculed its Cooterfest.

The deli's red, white and green tiled roof and terra cotta building clashes with the more conservative surroundings. Everyone who comes here expects the unexpected. And no one is ever disappointed.

It is lunchtime and the regulars are here. Lawyers and judges, dental hygienists, police officers, surgeons and city council members. Old poster-sized black-and-white photographs from Alfredo's and his wife's families cover the back wall next to the kitchen door.

Alfredo, 44, is running from behind the counter to the kitchen to the guest-filled tables, picking up babies and shaking hands. His older brother Rosario scurries between the espresso machine, gelato freezer and the panini press. Most customers don't bother to order, they let Alfredo or Rosario choose their meal. Regulars know not to ask for soda. "Lunch is free, but the Coke costs 99 dollars," Alfredo says.

He doesn't like cell phones, mayo or turkey sandwiches either. Some who have tried the deli don't come back after Alfredo refuses their requests. He has been known to close people's cell phones or laptops. He doesn't like people who won't try something new to them, like artichoke hearts or portobello mushrooms. After asking about allergies, he'll try slipping the offending ingredients into sandwiches and salads to see if people notice or complain. A few do. Many are delighted. The ones who do come back say Alfredo makes them feel special, like family.

It's 2 a.m. and Donna is baking. The large wooden island is covered with trays of almond cookies. She kneads dough gently between her fingers.

She's from New York, a city-lover. She met Alfredo on vacation in Bermuda. He was the chef at a high-end restaurant. Donna was an unhappy customer who sent back her food three times.

Determined to yell at her, Alfredo charged out of the kitchen. One look at Donna, and he forgot to be angry.

"You have David Bowie's eyes," he said.

"Yes," she said. "How did you know?"

They were married in 27 days.

A year later they moved to Orlando, without jobs. They lived out of Donna's Mercedes for six weeks, slipping into hotels to shower, drink and swim. Eventually they found work; Donna as a chef and Alfredo as a waiter.

They would occasionally visit Donna's aunt and uncle in Inverness. Each time they would ask Alfredo and Donna to take over the business. Each time they would decline. They didn't want to live in Inverness. It was too small. It has no nightlife.

Thirteen years ago, they relented.

Back then, it was just a little Italian grocery store. Donna wanted more. They started hosting four-hour, seven-course dinners on weekends. Just a few people gathering for food.

Slowly, Donna built the large family she had always wanted. First Rosario came for a visit and never left. Then came the baby, Gioia Mia. It took six miscarriages, two in vitro procedures and a surrogate carrier.

The baby is now 4, resident fashionista and mascot. Donna can't have more children.

She has this instead: Alfredo is the showman, Rosario the dutiful sidekick. Donna is the decisionmaker. This isn't the life they expected, but somehow it works.

Offbeat News Video



Celebrating National Nurses Week

Thanking you for the special care you provide.

The customers have come to accept them. Families, after all, are always a little strange.

"Whenever someone comes through the door, they always greet that person and it's always tailored to them," said Mark Buchala, 43, of Inverness. "It's not like you're just a stranger, it's like you're family."

"You can be 75 years old and they make you feel like you're the most beautiful woman in the world," added Mark's wife, Basia.

- - -

It is dark in Little Italy except for a few candles flickering. It is a Saturday night and more than 30 guests have come for their seven-course special. They've already eaten marinated lamb shanks, Portobello cream soup, fresh mozzarella and roasted red pepper salads, along with grilled zucchini and lemon sherbet, washed down with chianti.

Alfredo appears from the front door with a black sweatshirt over his head like a cloak. He hunches like an old woman. With Alfredo is his older brother, Rosario, dressed in a suit and black top hat. They sing an Italian death march, belting deep operatic tones. It is someone's birthday. Their present: a tomato cut in the shape of a heart, framed by chocolate lettering. Then Alfredo and Rosario disappear into the kitchen.

Alfredo reappears in a light pink dress and a long blond wig. He clutches Rosario's arm and wails into a towel as they walk together on their imaginary wedding night.

"My momma told me what you're going to do to me tonight," he cries. "I can't believe you are going to do that. It's my first time . . . with you."

Alfredo stops by a table of gawking diners.

"Hey sir, what a beautiful family," Alfredo says to a table of six. Turning to the rest of the room, he says, "On nights when they can't sleep, they make babies."

Dawn Reiss is a Chicago freelance writer and a former St. Petersburg Times staff writer. She can be reached at (813) 787-0454 or dreiss100@hotmail.com.

IF YOU GO:

Little Italy of Inverness Deli

124 N Apopka Ave., Inverness; (352) 726-5044; Hours: 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday; 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Friday; 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday. Seven-course dinners by reservation, Friday and Saturday evening.

[Last modified May 15, 2007, 06:34:08]

Share your thoughts on this story

First Name (only)

Location

Comment (May be published online and/or in print)

You have 250 characters left to comment.

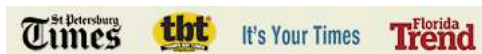
Send

Comments on this article

Hot Stock Profits

Breakout Pick Ready To Explode. Get In And Win! HotStockJournal.com

[Ads by Google](#)



© 2007 · All Rights Reserved · St. Petersburg Times
 490 First Avenue South · St. Petersburg, FL 33701 · 727-893-8111
[Contact Us](#) | [Join Us](#) | [Advertise with Us](#) | [Subscribe to the Times](#)
[Privacy Policy](#) | [Standard of Accuracy](#) | [Terms, Conditions & Copyright](#)