

# The SoCal FOOD & BEVERAGE P R O F E S S I O N A L

SAN DIEGO | ORANGE COUNTY | LOS ANGELES | SANTA BARBARA

By Bob Barnes

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## What's Cooking

### Sapori Ristorante—A Quarter of a Century of Culinary Excellence



Chef Sal Maniaci interacting with guests at Sapori Ristorante

**Nestled inside** a shopping center between the Cost Highway and Balboa Island just a short jaunt from the Pacific Ocean in Newport Beach, Sapori Ristorante is celebrating its 26th year of operation. Owner/Chef Sal Maniaci brought his firsthand knowledge of Italian cuisine from his native Palermo, Sicily, where he attended the Alberghiero culinary school before coming to the US in 1972 to study and help out at his brother's restaurant in Chicago. After eventually tiring of the icy cold winters, the brothers headed to the sunnier confines of Southern California in 1986 and eventually opened restaurants in Mission Viejo, Tustin, and Sapori in Newport Beach. (Sal now only owns Sapori and is the sole owner.)

As for his inspiration for cooking, Sal gives the nod to his mother: "My mother was a spectacular cook. Her passion was cooking and she was usually in the kitchen from 7 a.m. till 10 p.m. I learned a lot from her and wanted to cook since I was a child." While quite a bit of Sal's time is spent running the restaurant, he's involved in the kitchen, something he says he could not do without.

For a restaurant to stand the test of time with more than a quarter of a century under his belt, repeat customers are a must. Sal related that during the Great Recession his loyal customers kept coming, and this neighborhood restaurant's clientele consists of 95% repeat customers.

The interior of the restaurant features dark wood chairs, classy white tablecloths, artwork depicting scenes of Italy and walls clad in comforting hues of soft yellow; but most guests opt to dine in the outdoor garden patio, surrounded by lush greenery and an ambience enhanced by a wood burning stone fireplace and space heaters to keep everyone comfortable.

As for the food, fine dining quality abounds. Antipasti well worth whetting your appetite include mozzarella caprese with bufala, ripened tomatoes and basil; bruschetta al pomodoro & tapenade composed of toasted bread with fresh tomatoes, black olive paste, capers, and basil; and prosciutto e melone--cantaloupe wrapped with parma prosciutto. The menu is rounded out with a selection of salads, pastas and entrees such as homemade grilled Italian sausage with polenta; chicken breast sautéed with marsala, pine nuts, raisins and mushrooms; and veal scaloppine sautéed with white wine, with prosciutto and sage. A different style of risotto is created nightly, such as the porcini mushroom version we enjoyed, or ones featuring peas, seafood, sausage, and even strawberry. The nightly specials are quite hard to pass up. We were wowed by Chilean sea bass with artichoke sauce that was so tender it literally melted in our mouth like butter; a filet mignon with a delectable armagnac brandy reduction sauce; and lobster ravioli with a red sauce enlivened with cream. Don't be shy about ordering off the menu, as Sal and company are happy to accommodate requests.

Complementing the fine Italian fare is a

refined selection of California and Italian wines, such as the Vino Nobile di Montepulciano, a Tuscan D.O.C.G. Chianti that I thoroughly enjoyed. For dessert, the tiramisu is a classic done well-- ladyfingers soaked in espresso, vanilla and rum, with layers of marscapone, whipped cream and chocolate ganache.

Sapori recently expanded, as it took over the space next door to open the authentic Neapolitan-style Pizzeria Sapori. Adjoining the restaurant, it's equipped with a custom-made wood burning oven that can cook a pizza in a few minutes. Sal says he always has wanted to do a pizzeria making the pizza he's known all his life, and with unique dough nobody else does. The hand-tossed pizza crust is crunchy and chewy, not soggy, not too thick and not too thin and is made from a mother dough containing an 80-year-old yeast strain. Taking 72 hours to mature before being cooked rather than fermenting in your stomach, the result is a crust that is more digestible with no bloating. D.O.P. San Marzano tomatoes from Italy are used on the pies, such as the Capricciosa with artichokes, mushrooms, prosciutto cotto, mozzarella and pecorino romano, basil and EVOO. A selection of Pizza Bianche (no tomato sauce) includes the Sapori-- grape tomatoes, mozzarella and pecorino romano, grilled eggplant, zucchini, basil, and EVOO.

Sapori has stood the test of time due to the passion and leadership of Owner/Chef Sal Maniaci and the loyal of his staff and customers. Here's to another 26 years of excellence.

Sapori and Pizzeria Sapori are open for lunch on weekdays from 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. and dinner nightly from 4:30 p.m. to 10 p.m.

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