

Ma Raffa's brings authentic family-style Italian fare from Sicily to New Bedford



Ma Raffa's serves recipes that haven't changed for generations. (Erin Antone)

We've all heard the joke with its variations: "What do Chinese people call Chinese Food? Food!" The ethnicity of the household that you are raised in is just "food" to you, but to others it can be downright exotic and they would have to go out to a restaurant to enjoy it. Not being raised on a certain ethnic food, meant there was a mystique to it.

Being raised in a Sicilian-American household, people's minds are often blown, when I tell them if I don't have pasta at home, I'll just make it from scratch. I am often puzzled when people buy red sauce in a jar, when they already have tomatoes. But my mind is blown, when someone tells me they can make Chinese Dumplings, Mafongo, or Kale Soup. So it's simply a matter of perspective.



Hard to believe today, but Ma Raffa's was one of the only Italian eateries in the city when it opened in 1956.

Sicily is the poorest region in Italy, so the food we ate was very common, frugal, and meant to fill the belly by putting heapings of bread, pasta or *polenta*. The funny part, is that cuisines that used cheaper cuts of meat have now become incredibly popular. The reason being, that these grandmas have created dishes using these so-called inferior cuts and made masterpieces.

Italian cuisine, like all cuisines, has a great regional variety. So a treat for me would be to have upscale Italian or eat somewhere that specialized in central or northern. These are unfamiliar dishes to me, as foreign as Cuban food is. For me to eat at a southern Italian or Sicilian restaurant, is to basically compete with my nonna and mom. That's crazy talk!

However, since most of my friends are not Italian, it's not uncommon for them to select an Italian restaurant. So, they want Italian food, or for me "food." They want me to eat something I ate every day growing up. They want me to pay for something I could make in minutes for half the price. They want me to eat someone else's red sauce.

Going to the Dark Side

If I'm going to do these things, it better be good. Real good.

Better than good. I'm walking into such a place as a cynic. You can't make something as delicious as me or my family can until proven otherwise. You are guilty, until proven innocent, so to speak. I've only come to the "dark side" a few times.

One of the only places that has successfully done this – that I will gladly eat at a few times a week – is Ma Raffa's. This affordable, family-friendly, and casual Italian eatery is a New Bedford institution that has been around far longer than I've been alive. I still remember my first "power" lunch while working as a Mason's Apprentice in the mid-80s. I HAD to go, because my boss loved the place. I reluctantly ordered, and I figured I'll order something I didn't have at home growing up: a **Eggplant Parmagiana Sub**. Lightly battered, perfectly crispy on the outside, tender on the inside, an appropriate amount of melty cheese goodness and bread that was toasted impeccably so that it was crisped on the outside, but warm and soft on the inside.



Famous for their pizza, but the menu offers a large variety of Italian favorites. (Kirsten Santos/Mirrored Moments)

But, that sauce. The lifeblood of Italian households and Italian cuisine. Red sauce or as some call "gravy," (we can debate that another time) is something that is more often than not – downright horrible. Tampering with generations old recipes is a quick way to ruin a good sauce. Putting a medley

of herbs and spices is another surefire way to destroy it.

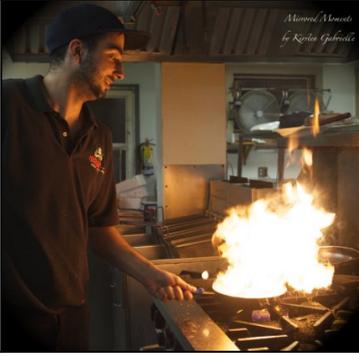
Here's a lesson for non-Italians: less is more. This is the maxim of Italian cuisine. Tomatoes, garlic, salt, pepper. DONE. If you want to sprinkle some fresh oregano or basil after the sauce has been made, you can. If you want to sweeten it with paper thin slices of carrots (NOT sugar) that melt into the sauce, go ahead. But no more.

Because of this golden rule of less ingredients, one is forced to focus on the quality and freshness. That is what makes the perfect sauce. This is what makes Ma Raffa's sauce *perfect*. In the case of whose red sauce is better, my nonna's or that of Ma Raffa's – I'll plead the fifth, but know that I would be proud to serve Ma Raffa's sauce as my own. That red sauce which is on the pasta, on the iconic thin-crust pizza and in the sandwiches is what has been drawing people to Ma Raffa's for decades. It's all sorts of mouth-watering amazing.

Tracing roots back to Messina, Sicily

So, what makes Ma Raffa's sauce so good? Well, besides the fact that the golden rule of "Less is more, fresh is best." they haven't tampered with the generations old recipe that has roots in Messina, Sicily – where Nunzio and Nunziata Raffa immigrated from, in the early 1900s. Why New Bedford? Messina is also a coastal fishing city. Like today, there wasn't an Italian community in New Bedford – in fact, there were only one or two places you could order a pizza by the time Nunzio and Nunziata's son Attilio opened Ma Raffa's in 1956.

The story on how Ma Raffa's came about is a common one: a person cooks for friends who are so blown away with how delicious the food is, that they say "You should open your own restaurant." In the 1950s, New Bedford's mills were buzzing with activity. These workers, of course, needed to eat.



The staff is a combination of family and extended family – all with a passion to serve the freshest and best Italian food. (Kirsten Santos/Mirrored Moments)

Nunziata would prepare meals for her daughter's friends who worked in these mills for a whopping 50 cents. Heaping plates of a classic: spaghetti and meatballs covered in that "Less is more, fresh is best." red sauce. As is often the case, word-of-mouth made Nunziata's food in high demand.

When a nearby luncheonette came up for sale, it seemed natural to take the next step that people were already pushing the family towards: opening a restaurant. Assistance came from a name known to anyone in the area who has eaten Italian food, Nunziata's brother-in-law Arman Riccardi. With his help, Attilio opened his restaurant Ma Raffa's.

What put Ma Raffa's on the proverbial map was that they served the pizza until late night. It became a popular destination for that much needed late night snack. Since then, Ma Raffa's has become the place to go for casual Italian fare, not just for those living in the New Bedford, but anyone on the South

Coast. There is something about Italian comfort food, that will compel people to drive long distances. It just feels like home. It feels American, not Italian. That home away from home feeling and atmosphere is what has contributed to the amazing success that Ma Raffa's has had and why they continue to succeed going on 60 years!

Ma Raffa's is still owned and operated by the Raffa family. Attilio and his wife Lucille operated and owned it for decades before passing it on to sons Steve and Dominick who are currently co-owners of both locations (there is another in Somerset). Steve's son Zach is the Operations Manager of the New Bedford location.

Menu of Italian Classics and Standards

While their pizza is famous in these parts, Ma Raffa's has a large menu with a variety of Italian favorites to choose from. All the classic **appetizers** are present: garlic bread, cheesy garlic bread, Mozzarella sticks, onion rings, fries, a variety of tenders (Buffalo, Golden Honey, Plain) and Spicy Chicken Zings.

Their monstrously large **Antipasto** starts with a hill of lettuce and is heaped high with salumi or salami, ham, and pepperoni. Shredded cheese, black olives, cucumber, tomato, onion, pepperoncini, and roasted red peppers round out this small mountain. The delicious house Italian dressing, is of course made from scratch. You can substitute the salumi for tuna or chicken.

If antipasto isn't your thing, you can have a small mountain of a different kind: **Italian salad** – lettuce, tomato, cucumber, onion, olive, pepperoncini, a Dinner salad, side salad or Gina's Salad which is the Italian salad with added Spinach and Feta cheese.



What made Ma Raffa's a legend: their mouth-watering, thin crust pizza. (Kirsten Santos/Mirrored Moments)

If you haven't had their pizza, ask around. Mouth watering, perfectly baked thin crust, that superlative sauce, the right size and perhaps the most affordable pie in the area with most large pizzas in the \$10 range. Like anywhere, all the standard toppings are available, but they really shine with their **signature pizzas**:

- **Nunziata**: Sliced chicken breast, roasted red peppers, sauce and cheese.
- **Mamma Mia**: Hamburg, bacon, sausage, pepperoni, linguica, sauce and cheese.
- **Antonio**: Eggplant with two cheeses and sauce.
- **Bella Maria**: Pineapple, ham sauce and cheese.
- **Cecilia** (White Pizza): Fresh sliced tomatoes, garlic and cheese.
- **Madelena** (White Pizza): Fresh Spinach, garlic and cheese.
- **"Mad" Cecelia** (White Pizza): Fresh spinach, tomatoes, garlic and cheese.
- **Giovanna**: Whole baby clams, garlic and cheese.

Live it up. Variety is the spice of life, and there is more to the pizza world than a pepperoni pizza! You can't go wrong by being a little adventurous and trying one of Ma Raffa's signature pies. How affordable, you ask? An everyday large

plain pizza is 4.99 and large pepperoni 5.99. Yes, large. Monday through Thursday you can grab a large pizza with up to 3 toppings for 7.99. Add mozzarella sticks or fried mac & cheese bites to any pizza for 2.99. **Any** day.

If you are one that likes something besides a home packed lunch or something off the cantina, you can get get a full belly for a super affordable rate – Lunch is served Monday-Friday until 4:30pm. 12" cheese pizza for \$5.49, Meatball Sandwich with fries for \$5.49. Half Italian Grinder with fries for \$6.29. Minestrone soup, a salad and garlic bread for \$5.99 or you can choose from one of their meals like manicotti, lasagna, ravioli, stuffed shells, baked ziti, etc – all served with soup or salad and garlic bread, for \$6.49. The spaghetti or ziti is even cheaper at \$4.99.

There is also a “blue collar” **Hot Sandwiches** section which include everyone’s lunch favorites: Meatball, a variety of Grinders (Veggie, Italian, Ham, Roast Beef, Bacon, Tuna, Chicken), Sausage, Linguica, BLT, Steak & Cheese, Chicken Parm, etc. All between \$5-\$7.

Of course, Ma Raffa’s is a casual family restaurant, and no family restaurant worth its salt wouldn’t have a **children’s section**.



The antipastos and salads are made

fresh to order and one of my personal favorites!(Kirsten Santos/Mirrored Moments)

Cheese Ravioli, Spaghetti or Ziti with a meatball or meat sauce for \$4.99. The simple spaghetti or ziti with tomato sauce is only \$3.99! Crazy prices!

The entrees which include “**Ma’s Favorites**” and **Traditional Italian Dishes** sections of the menu have all those standard Italian classics you love, like Veal or Chicken Parmagiana, Veal Scallopini, Chicken Cacciatore, Spaghetti with Clam Sauce or homemade meatballs, Shrimp Scampi, tortellini, baked lasagna, manicotti, stuffed shells, and more.

New England is one of the **seafood** capitals of the world, and of course, Ma Raffa’s has plenty of choices in the department. There is a nice mixture of Italian and American. The Italian dishes are fully represented: Spaghetti with Clam Sauce (one of my personal favorites – reminds me of childhood), Shrimp Scampi, Shrimp Carbonara, and Shrimp, Broccoli & Ziti. The American section consists of Baked Sea Scallops, Fish & Chips or Salad, and one of their most popular dishes: Baked haddock – topped with buttery cracker crumbs, served with a side of pasta, french fries, or green beans.

Got a babysitter and just want a nice romantic dinner at home? Ma Raffa’s offers some impressive party platters. The **Italian Platter for Two** consists of “A heaping pile of spaghetti or ziti, a full serving of lasagna, two meatballs, two Italian sausages, and a veal pattie, all topped with Ma’s homemade tomato sauce and served with garlic bread” for \$16.49. A veritable feast for two for less than \$20.

The **Ma’s Dinner for Two** gets you any two beverages (wine, beer, soft drink, coffee or tea), a small antipasto and Ma’s

Italian Platter spaghetti, lasagna, meatballs, sausages, veal AND hot garlic bread. As they say "The best deal in the house."

If you have a huge appetite, bring it to Ma Raffa's on the first Tuesday of each month (Wednesday in Somerset) and enjoy their Italian Buffet: a weekly helping of all "Ma's" best sellers including Garlic Bread, Salad, Lasagna, Chicken Parmigiana, Meatballs, Sausages, and a variety of their specialty dinners and traditional classic pasta dishes, plus pizza and pudding!

Summary

Americans have a love affair with Italian food and Ma Raffa's is the quintessential casual, family Italian restaurant. With traditional recipes brought from Messina, Sicily by Nunziata Raffa to New Bedford, you get to feel like you are eating in someone's home in the old country.

Prices are affordable so that you can bring the whole family, eat until stuffed, bring home leftovers, even on a budget. For the blue collar worker looking for lunch, you'll have a fast, inexpensive meal that will keep you going for the rest of the day. The children's menu offering means there's no convincing the kids to go out, because it has every American kid's favorite. The platters mean you have take a date or that special other and enjoy a romantic dinner.

There's ample parking in the lot across the street, in their own lot on site and along Rockdale Avenue. Gift certificates are available and Ma Raffa's is handicap accessible.



Love for what they do comes out in the food and the service. (Kirsten Santos/Mirrored Moments)

Ma Raffa's

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Hours of Operation:

Mon-Sun: 11:00am-9:00pm

Facebook: facebook.com/pages/Ma-Raffas-New-Bedford

Website: maraffas.com/

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