

# The Pasta House; A Superlative Inspiration



Growing up in an Italian household has spoiled me in many ways as I'm sure it has for many of the readers. You can't *not* compare your grandmother's or mother's cooking to wherever you eat out. Stick with me. I have a point.

Because everyone, male and female, young and old, helped in preparing and cooking meals in our household, I learned scores of homemade recipes. Why go out to eat at an Italian restaurant, when I can just cook those dishes using better recipes and costing a fraction of the price? Give me flour, eggs, tomatoes and a quarter pound of ground meat and I'll make some pasta Bolognese for 3-4 people and it'll cost less than \$5.

Most Italian restaurants in the area focus on one or two regions and usually a handful of the most popular dishes. Pizza, lasagna, pasta Bolognese, bruschetta, perhaps pesto and their variants comprise the bulk of most menus. I've been disenfranchised, disheartened, disappointed and a few other dis-something-ed. Since my family is from Sciacca, Sicily the food is modest. It was a poor region of Italy at the time immigrants like my great-grandparents came to America and the food reflects that. Now I need to say, that I simply love pizza, lasagna, and simple *paste* dishes. But, I'd like to try some genuine Italian food from other regions, and something

more extravagant, and far richer than my upbringing.

While I grew up in New Bedford, I went to High School in Fairhaven. The Pasta House was there then. I recall the window to the public so you could watch a worker hand grind meat for sausages and make pasta. I remember the minstrels – the accordionist and violinist. That was 15+ years ago. Alden Road is a street that I drive down nearly every day and often multiple times a day. I can't help glance over at the Pasta House, especially since the stunning renovations they have done. It's a beautiful building.

But you know when you drive by something a thousand, a few thousand times and it becomes a part of the blurred background? You stop noticing it. I unfairly, labeled the Pasta House as too expensive to eat at. I thought to myself perhaps someday there will be a special occasion and I'll be able to enjoy it. I don't know where I got this idea from. It's quite an old misconception.

Herein lies a problem. I would drive by on a Monday or Wednesday night and the parking lot would be jam packed. Drive by at lunch time on a Tuesday – parking lot jam packed. Drive by any time or day of the week and it's jam packed. If it's so expensive, how are all these people there every day, all day? I'm thinking I may be wrong. I need to find out.

As luck would have it serendipity wanted to play and owner Mario Ribeiro who enjoys New Bedford Guide, wanted a review done sometime in the future. This worked out well, because I could visit there without anyone recognizing me or "fixing" the review. The whole point of a review is to see how a restaurant operates with regularity and not when there are special guests. I made two visits over a three week period, before we scheduled the review.

My experience was identical – exceptional, superlative, outstanding, consistent – in all three visits. In fact, my

first visit was eye opening. My second visit, I was stunned and during my third the recognition that there is something very special going on here, settled in and made a home. I need the Pasta House in my life.

### **Decor & Ambiance**

While you may think they've done a great job on the outside and it looks gorgeous, the inside even outdoes that. The stonework continues throughout the eatery. A dark wood lines the floor. There is a bit of a retro feel to the lighting and color scheme with its grays, tans, and browns. The spacing between tables and booths is roomy, giving some limited privacy if the conversation is light. I am not an architect, and you're here for the food, so...;)



### **The Food**

Within a minute after sitting, our waitress came, introduced herself and took our drink orders. She was back in a flash with the drinks and the first delight to come to the table: perfectly cooked, round bread rolls. Crusty on the outside, warm, soft and moist on the inside. A small saucer of Parmesan cheese and extra virgin olive oil accompanied the rolls. Not to be bypassed. This little treat is symbolic of Italian

cooking – few, simple ingredients, but the freshest, highest quality available.

A quick glance at the menu demonstrated a multi-regional approach to Italian cuisine. While not savvy on every region I saw dishes from Tuscany, Sicily, Naples, Lombard, and even Lazio.

My brother, my girlfriend Rachael and I are huge fans of calamari and it just doesn't seem right to not order them as an appetizer if a place offers it. The problem with the calamari at the Pasta House is the portion! Twice, I have virtually ruined my appetite trying to conquer this massive plate of succulent, tender calamari sprinkled with juicy banana peppers. They were lightly battered, no crispies, and a flavorful remoulade dip accompanied it. For now on, Joe remember "Eat half, take the rest home."

Each entree comes with a choice of soup – minestrone, chowder or Toscana – or salad. I'm a sucker for Toscana soup, so got that in all three visits. This is unlike the Olive Garden's version. It is much richer, which I think is because of a broth and a little saltier. It has a very "roasted" flavor. A perfect creamy, medley of sausage and bacon bits, Russet potatoes, garlic and just enough onion to add a hint of sweetness. Mike ordered the salad, which to be honest I didn't even glance at because of the deliciousness in front of me!

For entrees in my three visits, I ordered a Steak, the Saltimbocca, and Cioppino. Rachael ordered the Kobe Meatballs with Fresh Spaghetti, and Mike ordered the Scallops Alla Pasta House and of course, I tried both of their entrees.

### ***Saltimbocca***

The Saltimbocca is a tenderized, butterflied boneless chicken (or veal) covered in prosciutto, mushrooms, and a thin layer, of fresh mozzarella covered in a wine sauce and melted sage butter. It comes with a side of fresh fettuccine with red

sauce. This left me speechless. You know that hush that comes over a table because everyone is consumed – pardon the pun – by the food in front of them? That is Saltimbocca. I was pleased, nay overjoyed, that the mozzarella was proportioned properly. Not a massive, overpowering gob, but a layer that was in perfect proportion to compliment the juicy chicken breast and salty Prosciutto. A menage-a-trois if you will. The red sauce was comprised of tomatoes. Yeah, that's my bag! Fresh, succulent, ripe tomatoes with a pinch of salt and pepper. Perfetto!

### ***Cioppino***

The Cioppino is an Italian seafood stew. Its base is a lightly spicy tomato broth and stewed tomatoes. It is the Italian version of Bouillabaisse for those who have had that. It's CHOCK full of a generous amount of lobster meat, shrimp, scallops, little-necks, scrod, and about a dozen mussels. Over the top of this glorious orgy is fresh spinach. The side is fresh linguine in a marinara sauce. While the linguine in another context would be considered fluff or a filler (to impress with portions), this was truly a star on its own. I can't emphasize enough that simple, fewer, but fresher ingredients is the rub of Italian cuisine. The Pasta House pays tribute to the old country here.

### ***Scallops Alla Pasta House***

The Scallops Alla Pasta House-were an abundance of pan seared New Bedford sea scallops, drizzled in a cream sauce, sprinkled with diced bacon over a bed of fresh spinach fettuccine. The scallops were perfectly cooked and again accompanied with the proper proportion of creamy sauce. Nothing worse than noodles swimming in a sea of sauce.

I order seafood from restaurants on rare occasions. Having worked in the seafood industry for almost two decades, I've come to have serious disdain for processed seafood and for anyone that serves it. The only reason to serve processed seafood is to save money, by lowering expenses. When your

priority is not quality ingredients, but to lower expenses it's only a matter of time before that business fails. At a bare minimum, that eatery will never maximize their profits. Why? As above, so below. It is indicative of the leaders mindset. It is based in fear, not in abundance.

There is a distinct sweetness to fresh shrimp, scallops and fish that is utterly and totally wiped out when it is processed. This is why I buy from fish markets and cook it myself. Every single piece of seafood that my brother and I had was fresh. I felt like weeping. When I order seafood, I assume I am going to be disappointed. When I ordered it, my shoulders began to tense. My breathing began to pick up pace. I prepared for the letdown. OK, that's hyperbole, but the the part about expecting to be let down was the genuine article.

### ***Kobe Meatballs with Fresh Spaghetti***

Kobe Meatballs with Fresh Spaghetti is just that fresh spaghetti with the the amount of red sauce that you would get in Italy – enough to just coat the noodles. Sauce isn't supposed to overpower the dish, but compliment it. Problem is when you eat dried pasta or pasta processed in massive amounts there is no point in showcasing it. It's best to showcase the sauce. Not at the Pasta House. Enough sauce that you can taste the spaghetti. Crazy right? The real star of this show though it the two quarter pound meatballs. You can *taste* that these are different. I haven't had enough Kobe beef to be able to describe in detail what it is. While it is a subtly different then the beef treasures that most of us are used to, it is distinct enough to warrant mentioning. A gentler, richer version of polpette.

That damn calamari did me in. At 43 years of age, I learned about 5 years ago, that if I don't stop eating at 3/4s full I will be miserable for the next few hours. I have only broken that rule perhaps 3 times in that 5 year period and twice was the past two weeks at the Pasta House. In spite of being stuffed to the hilt, my sadistic brother mandated that for it

to be a comprehensive review it has to include dessert. I told him, I might be able to muster a bit, but wasn't really interested.

Our waitress Kari on this third visit, I should mention was the exemplar waitress and made this ultimate visit the delight that it was. Intuitive, attentive, pleasant, and friendly. Apparently, she was in on the sadism and brought over an iPad to scroll through the desserts. If there was any possibility of getting a pass on the dessert it just went out the window. I could swear both of them were laughing inside, because as the image passed by, I noticed both were smiling. Schadenfreude, I say.



### **Summation**

Dining once at the Pasta House will induce culture shock. One visit will paint a contrast so vivid that you will realize how many awful places you've been to. Looking about and making simple observations throughout my meal, I had an epiphany and one that I think many would have if you haven't eaten there; I eat at so many average places that I have lowered the bar and become numb.

I've been desensitized to mediocrity and accepted it. Now, this is not to say there are only sub-par eateries in the region. There are many above average, world-class restaurants.

For some world class applies to the quality of food or preparation. For others, it applies to the service or ambiance. It's rare to find one place that puts them all together. What I'm trying to illustrate here is that the Pasta House does just that. There isn't a weak spot.

### ***Service***

The service is a well-oiled machine. I noticed waitstaff assisting each other without communicating. Did they hire and debrief some Borg? At one point in the evening I noticed a waitress place the plates that were to arrive to the customer, down in a rest area. Another one of her customers interrupted the process and had a question. Another waitress passing by, without word, picked up the plates and served them and moved on. Three tables near us were all cleared within 30 seconds and reset within a minute or two. Not one person rushed. It was simply timed impeccably.

I listened to every waiter and waitress within earshot, and noticed the same manner; patient, polite yet not stuffy, relaxed, amiable. Most importantly attentive. Not a single waiter was overbearing. The perfect balance of available, yet not hanging over your shoulder. Here's the rub – I got the feeling that the waitstaff *wanted* to be there. These things do NOT happen by accident or luck. They are a product of experience, and a constant eye on improvement. I have said this in many articles before – this is a trickle down process. When the leaders set the example, prioritize morale and atmosphere it translates into excellence for the employees.

### ***Pricing***

The Pasta House in terms of cost is priced perfectly. There are dishes that start at \$8.99 and there are dishes that are triple that. A glass of wine is between \$5-\$8. A variety of martinis are \$8. 12" pizzas are between \$9-\$11, most entrees are in the \$11.99-\$19.99 range.

For two people to eat, an appetizer, drink, and entrees you



are looking to spend \$40-\$50. That is not super expensive. A couple can get an average service at another eatery for about \$25-\$30 but for \$10-\$15 more get a world class dining experience. In my opinion, the quality of service and food is high enough for them to warrant charging even more. They could easily do this without being unreasonable. That means it is an extremely fair price for what you get.

The ambiance, decor, service, quality of ingredients, and attention to detail can only be summed up in one word – inspired.

**The Pasta House**

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**Facebook:**

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**Mon-Thu:** 11:30am – 9:30pm

**Fri:** 11:30am – 10pm

**Sat:** 4pm – 10pm

**Sun:** 4pm – 9pm

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**Fall Menu Items:**

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