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Past Stories

Vacation in Campania

Thursday, April 17, 2008 3:00 AM EDT

The colorful sign at the side of East Main Street in Branford reads Campania Ristorante & Taverna. You won't see the restaurant at first, but if you take the turn and follow the driveway, you'll come upon a snug house surrounded by condos and a few retail establishments.

There's a patio in front and a main entrance via a back porch; insiders may remember the place as Auberge d'Asie, home of high-style cuisine from Vietnam, or, before that, a beloved watering hole called 280 Pub.

Today it is Campania, a polished eatery that's warm to its bones, run with love

by husband-wife team Ron and Nancy Solevo. At a sumptuous feast there last week, I and my dining companions remembered just how wonderful Italian cookery can be.

I also discovered that Campania is at the center of a dining dynasty that began decades ago when Ron's grandfather, Antonio Gagliardi, opened Gag's Restaurant in the Wooster Street neighborhood and subsequently introduced the Italian Sandwich the grinder to our city and, allegedly, our country.

Ron says that Pop Gag sold so many grinders that he made the bakers rich. Pop also made lots of children 12 in all and every one of them got involved in the food/beverage industry. Gag's Pepper Pot, Gag Jr.'s Liquor, Patricia's, the Orange Platter, Gag's Club Le Mosque ... all these and more were projects of the Gagliardi clan.

Ron's mom was part of that family, and he remembers growing up in a household where all we did was eat. Mom was an accomplished cook. I learned a lot from her, says Ron. And Dad was a concrete man who had been a cook in the Army.

Ron's dad also loved restaurants, and one of his favorite hang-outs was a popular eatery in East Haven called the Sparkling Cave. In 1972, the place went up for sale. My parents bought the building, recalls Ron, and opened Antonio's, named after my grandfather.

Featuring traditional Italian dishes as well as coveted family recipes, Antonio's became a local favorite, and the Solevo family, including Ron and his brothers Francis and Michael, kept the place humming.

Enter Nancy Ziemke, an East Haven gal with a Pennsylvania Dutch background who met Ron through mutual friends and fell in love at first sight. The two were 17 years old and dating when Ron's mother visited Nancy at Friendly's, where she had a job scooping ice cream, and recruited her for a waitress gig at Antonio's.

I never left, recalls Nancy with a laugh. I'd intended to go to college, but the restaurant world swept me up.

The next 20 years saw life, death, growth, change; in 1998, when Mrs. Solevo was ready to hand

over the property, Nancy and Ron bought Antonio's. They ran it, successfully, until 2004. At that point, Ron had become ill; he was under a huge amount of pressure, recalls Nancy. Plus, he was missing seeing his children grow up. Thus, Antonio's was sold to the Colavolpe family, featuring rising star and head chef Gina Colavolpe.

The Colavolpes are smart businesspeople, reports Ron. They took over the name, much of the menu, and even kept some of the help.

As for the Solevos, they immediately started searching for a new location to call their own, though they had a two-year noncompete clause. Part of their exploration included a trip to Italy, where they visited Ron's ancestral land in Campania. There they found inspiration. If I had my choice, I would never have left Italy, says Nancy. They also found a name for their future restaurant.

On September 17, 2007, Nancy and Ron bought the building and the land in Branford, located three miles from the home where their kids Ronnie, Joseph and Giovannina grew up. Two months later, Campania opened for business.

Right from the beginning, word of mouth spread, people knew we were from the original Antonio's, says Nancy. Even before we opened, we'd run into people in the grocery store and they'd say, I must have your pane cotta!

That Pane Cotta is worth begging for, as are so many dishes on Campania's menu. My party swooned over huge, luxurious plates of Pork Brascioli, Pollo Bocconcini (chicken breasts with mushrooms, shallots, prosciutto and fresh mozzarella), and Vitello Mediterraneo, featuring a whole lobster tail, lump crab meat and shrimp over fettuccine with a tomato cognac cream sauce.

Everything we tasted was extra-delicious, including some unusual wines from the Campania region, made from some of the oldest vines in the world. And everything was served with pride and polish. Ron and Nancy tell me that the traditional dishes are still a favorite, including Pop Gag's own recipes for Bucatini, Seafood Salad and Linguini Antonio, a speedy sauce of olive oil, anchovies, sliced garlic and basil. And who can resist ordering old-world delicacies like Suffritto and Trippa?

I highly recommend Campania. I personally can't wait to go back. I'm going to sit on the new patio, sip ancient wines and immerse myself in the culinary journey that is the Solevo legacy.

THE ESSENTIALS

Place: Campania Ristorante & Taverna, 284 E. Main St., Branford.

Phone: (203) 483-7773.

Web: campaniaristorante.com.

Hours: Lunch noon to 3 p.m. Mondays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays. Dinner 3-10 p.m. Mondays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays; noon-10 p.m. Saturdays; 1-9 p.m. Sundays. Closed Tuesdays.

Reservations: Accepted (and recommended) only for parties of four or more, due to limited space; smaller parties are welcome as walk-ins, and can enjoy a drink at the bar while space becomes available.

-Note: The outdoor patio at Campania will soon be open; ask for it by name. Until then, chilly nights are warmed by a fireplace in the restaurant's small bar/lounge area.

Food: The Solevo legacy continues at an inviting little restaurant where traditional Italian recipes

◆ many passed down through generations ◆ come to life in a most delicious way. The large menu features old-world selections like veal hearts and tripe, plus locally famous dishes such as Seafood Salad, Pane Cotta, and Sunday Sauce. Prices are moderate and, as far as I can tell, there isn't a weak dish on the menu. Try the special desserts, including Ice Box Cake and Ricotta Pie, made by Nancy Solevo.

Drink: A full bar is complemented by a fine wine list with unusual selections from the Campania region of Italy.

Wheelchair access: Through the dining room entrance at the back of the restaurant.

Credit cards: MasterCard, Visa, Amex.

Kid-friendliness: The kitchen will cook to please, with kid-sized portions and prices.

Parking: In a free lot to the front, back and side of the building.

Private parties: Campania can accommodate business meetings, private parties, off-site catering and trays to pick up.

-Note No. 2: Campania will be closed May 16-19, while the family celebrates Ronnie Jr.'s college graduation.

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