

A touch of Tuscany is yours at Ristorante Piatti in the Livery

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John Perkins has seen a lot of marriage proposals. As the manager of Ristorante Piatti, a romantic but casual Italian restaurant in Danville's Livery, he has had several requests to make "popping the question" go smoothly. There was the time he hid behind a plant and surreptitiously filmed the entire proposal. There was also the time when the boyfriend requested that the ring be hidden in a decadent dessert. Perkins stood nearby while the unknowing bride-to-be just fiddled with her spoon, engrossed in the conversation, oblivious to the melting gelato surrounding the elaborate cookie shell rosette that held the diamond ring. The minutes dragged by with the boyfriend sweating bullets. Finally, Perkins couldn't stand it any longer and urged the lady to eat her melting dessert which elicited a scream that caught every diner's attention.

The past 12 years as manager of Ristorante Piatti has been the highlight of Perkins' 36 years in the business. He claims he has held every restaurant job at one time or another, from waiting tables to managing fine establishments. He was working in San Diego when he first heard of Ristorante Piatti. "The underlying theme of the company appealed to me, mainly the sense of autonomy they give to general managers. Also, the way they treat people from the second they walk in the door, was in keeping with my philosophy," said Perkins. When he attended training in Sacramento, the need for a manager at the Danville restaurant was raised, to which Perkins responded, "Where's Danville?" Nonetheless, he took the job and says, "It was the best move I could have made. It's multi-dimensional up here, with regards to getaways, culture, and climate. San Diego is more one-

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— Jim Wahlberg, Keller Williams' Bay Area Team

dimensional — and although it's a pretty good dimension, I fell in love with everything about this area."

Ristorante Piatti's slogan is "Italian Inspired — Locally Grown." The menu consists of classic and contemporary dishes that use fresh ingredients from local farmers, dairies, and ranchers. "There are faces behind the foods that we use," says Perkins, referring to the relationships Piatti's has with the people who grow the food. There are currently twelve Piatti's restaurants spanning California, Seattle, Denver and San Antonio. Perkins says that the company "is more food driven than ever."

Because Ristorante Piatti only uses what's in season this sometimes causes ongoing battles with the customers — but fun ones. A customer will wonder why the winter menu lacks Caprese, which consists of mozzarella, basil and tomatoes, or why the Bruschetta is made with olives and mushrooms instead of tomatoes. Tomatoes and basil aren't fresh in the winter and Bruschetta can be made in a variety of ways.

"I'd love to spend months in a Tuscan villa, go to the market and prepare foods based on what's there," said Perkins. "Basically we do that here. One can go to the Ferry Building in San Francisco early in the morning when they have their Farmer's market and prepare a menu based on what's there." Chef Michael Baker works with the company's culinary director Chris

Fernandez, as well as local businesses to create sensational dishes. Baker, who trained in Hawaii for 9 years, has fine tuned many of the original recipes, while adding new ones to the menu. The classic Lemon Ravioli was lightened, increasing its popularity. The Chicken Almatone and "anything with salmon" are also high-demand dishes. Although Piatti's has some of the same dishes in all their restaurants, each is different according to the needs of the community. "This community loves pizzas and pastas, but it is more protein driven than a lot of the other restaurants. It needs a good selection of fowl and seafood," said Perkins. Consequently, the Danville menu has a longer list of meat and fish entrees than other Ristorante Piatti's.

Customer enthusiasm is Ristorante Piatti's greatest asset. Jim Wahlberg calls "Piatti's 'my second kitchen.'" As a realtor with Keller Williams' Bay Area Team, Wahlberg holds business lunches there four times a week. As a regular customer for 11 years, Wahlberg has held surprise birthday parties for his wife that he says were "over the top" in quality and service. "John Perkins has empowered his team to be the best

human beings they can be," said Wahlberg. "The Piatti's experience is consistent with great service and it's creative with its seasonal menu. The staff has been given permission to be great at what they do. This is different from any other restaurant experience I've had."

Ristorante Piatti is spacious, making it perfect for gatherings of all sizes. A private room holds 30-35, the patio holds 60-70, and the semi-private wing of the restaurant can also seat 60-70 people. One aspect of the business that is growing rapidly is catering. The catering director, Tami Morgan, helps plan everything from sit-down dinners, to business box lunches to elaborate buffets.

The casual, Tuscan ambiance atmosphere of Ristorante Piatti is created with white table linens, warm paint hues, Italian country-side paintings, a fireplace, and a spacious bar. This informal elegance makes it a comfortable place to take families. The kid's menu is brilliant: kids build their own "bambini pizza," using all the ingredients to create a pizza masterpiece that the chef cooks in the wood fired grill.

Ristorante Piatti is also fancy enough to take that special someone to propose.

Its romantic charm seems to have rubbed off on Perkins. He met his fiancée in the restaurant and the two are now planning an October wedding. That's amore!

Ristorante Piatti is located at 100 Sycamore Road in the Danville Livery. 925-838-2082