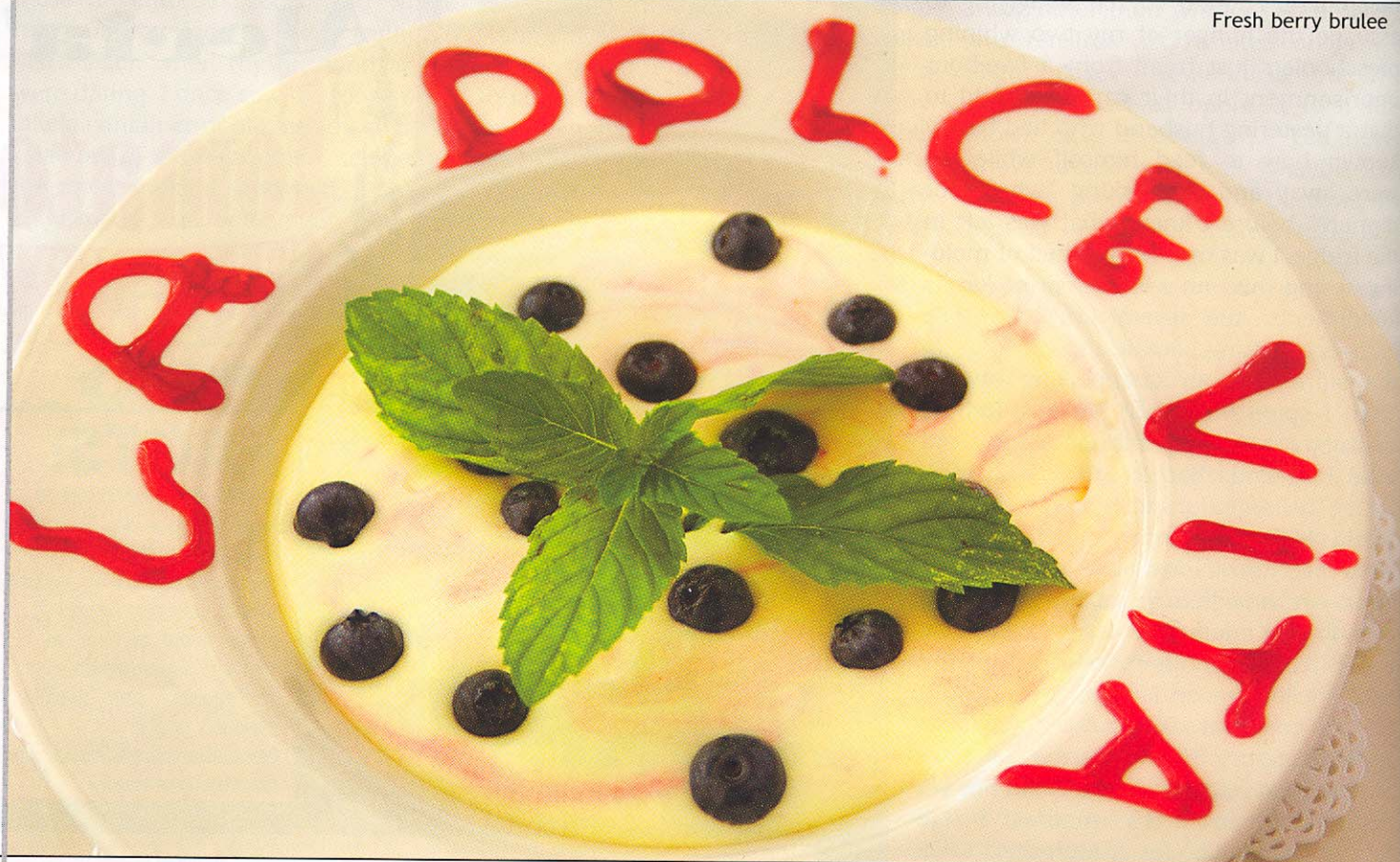


## Small Beauty

When you find a restaurant like La Dolce Vita, where the distractions are few and the background is low-key but elegant, you know that the food takes center stage.

BY LOYD MCINTOSH

Fresh berry brulee



Birmingham is a peculiar city when it comes to its restaurant scene. Things are so spread out and decentralized, you hardly know which part of town to go to get what. There's no real Chinese district, nor Mexican district, nor Greek district. And, even though there is no Little Italy, like in other major American cities, it's impossible to have lived in Birmingham very long without coming to understand the importance of the Italian influence on the Birmingham restaurant scene.

Even if you can't necessarily walk through downtown and hop into a friendly neighborhood Italian restaurant for a great plate of lasagna or a great bottle of wine in a room that is

cozy and intimate and you can get to know the staff on a first name basis within a few minutes of your first arrival, Birmingham is home to places like this. Sometimes you just have to look a little harder for them here. La Dolce Vita is just such a place.

Located in Hoover off Highway 31, La Dolce Vita is a small and quaint restaurant just a few doors down from the larger and more noticeable Hunan Garden Chinese Restaurant. Operating in the same diminutive space since 1997, La Dolce Vita is as intimate and private as you can imagine. With only 11 tables, this little restaurant in Hoover has been serving some of the area's

finest Italian cuisine for over six years. While the Birmingham restaurant scene has moved into a much different direction, La Dolce Vita has remained true to itself, a charming and personal Italian restaurant. And, to owner and chef Lorenzo Billitteri, a self-described control freak, that is perfectly okay with him.

A native of Tampa, Florida, Billitteri grew up in the restaurant business, learning the ins and outs of the industry from his father. From him, Billitteri developed his sense of order and restraint that has dominated his character throughout his career and motivates him now in his daily activities at La Dolce Vita.

"My dad got me in this business





Prawns de-glazed in Gran Marnier sauce topped with burre blanc

when I was about 10 years old and I was never able to get out of it, but I enjoy it," Billitteri says. "It's all about hard work, paying attention to detail and striving for perfection. That's hard to do, but to get as close to perfection as possible, I think, is the key."

Now, at age 37, the devoted and intense Billitteri leaves nothing to chance in his quest for culinary exactness. He has resisted the temptation to expand his restaurant into a larger space, where, Billitteri believes, his restaurant would not only lose the special appeal that has developed a loyal following of diners since he opened his doors, but would make it impossible for him to control every aspect of his business.

"That's why it's a small place, so I can stay on top of everything," Billitteri said, "and I kind of like it that way. We're small and we try to make

everything perfect.

"We haven't advertised at all since we opened up," Billitteri added. "If you run a restaurant this small and you have to advertise, you're doing something wrong. When our customers leave, we want them to feel like they really got their money's worth."

However, realizing he can't do everything on his own, Billitteri relies on co-owners Virna Andres, who has been with La Dolce since it's opening, and Peter Antonio, a 20 plus-year veteran of the Birmingham restaurant scene who joined Billitteri earlier this year.

Antonio recently came back to Birmingham from Gulf Shores, where he ran his own restaurant for several years before packing up and moving back to the Magic City. Formerly, Antonio managed Jinky's in Inverness and Antonio's in

Homewood, a restaurant that was occupied by the Brass Rail for many years.

"I started off with a partner and ended up buying him out, so Virna and I ran this place for ourselves for about four years and we did the best we could," Billitteri said. "I finally thought we needed to bring someone else in. So, Pete came in and it was perfect. We're working out really great."

Together, Billitteri, Andres and Antonio keep the restaurant running smoothly, focusing on creating memorable meals for their customers with only a small crew to help pull it all together.

When you find a restaurant like La Dolce Vita, where the distractions are few and the background is low-key but elegant, you know that the food takes center stage. At La Dolce Vita, diners will find a variety of dishes on





Crab cakes with burre blanc sauce

the menu, equally influenced in the flavors of northern and southern Italy, all prepared under the watchful direction of Billitteri.

"We specialize in Northern and Southern Italian cuisine with a little Continental-touch," Billitteri said.

Diners are warmly greeted by Andres as soon as they walk through the door and are immediately shown to their table in the restaurant's graceful dining room. Then, before you have had the opportunity to study the menu too deeply, Antonio, or a member of La Dolce Vita's well-trained staff, serves you a small portion of bruschetta to whet your appetite. The bruschetta is highlighted by diced tomatoes that have been marinated in fresh herbs and olive oil, and is only a small hint of what is to come.

Among the restaurant's appetizers, you'll find very traditional Italian specialties, such as zuppa di clams, zuppa di mussels, or calamari, all of which can be served in either a light marinara sauce or fradivolo, a harder and spicier sauce. However, the appetizer that is a great source of pride, particularly for Antonio, is the crab cake.

"We use 90 percent lump crab meat here for our crab cakes," Antonio says. "It's a Maryland style crab cake topped with a beurre blanc sauce and with fresh spices. We get a lot of repeat business on our crab cakes alone."

Antonio utilizes fresh lump crabmeat, a mixture of fresh herbs and a judicious amount of lemon juice and forms them into shape. Then, he pan sautés the cakes in extra-virgin olive oil and serves them with a light and enticing sauce made with mango and kiwi, for an original crab cake that has a decidedly Caribbean feel. Antonio's version of the crab cake easily ranks among the best in Birmingham, which, in recent years, seems to have become a de facto crab cake capital.

As for main dishes, you'll find more familiar pasta dishes, such as lasagna and ravioli, along with more specialized dishes, like fettuccine carbonara, with bacon, onions and mushrooms in an alfredo sauce; and penne alla quattro formaggio, a cheese-lover's delight with fontina, gorgonzola, Romano and parmigiano cheese.

Billitteri's menu also features a collection of chicken and veal dishes, such as chicken saltinbocca, which is a chicken breast sautéed in red wine, with mushrooms and topped with prosciutto ham and mozzarella cheese; and veal piccata, sautéed in white wine, lemon, mushrooms and capers.

But what really stands out at La Dolce Vita are the specials, many of which feature fresh gulf snapper prepared in a variety of ways. First, there is snapper francese, in which Billitteri lightly batters a snapper filet in a flour and egg mixture and

## THE DETAILS: *La Dolce Vita*

PHONE: 985-2909

ADDRESS: 1850 MONTGOMERY HWY., HOOVER

HOURS: MON.-THURS. 5-10 P.M.;  
FRI. & SAT. 5-11 P.M.

RESERVATIONS RECOMMENDED

NON-SMOKING

HANDICAP ACCESSIBLE

CHEF SERVICE AVAILABLE

then broils the fish with lemon slices, white wine, lemon juice, crab meat and a beurre blanc sauce. The snapper comes to your table with mushrooms and placed over a bed of pasta for a fresh, lemony seafood dish that is truly a highlight when on the specials menu.

"It's a very light dish. It's simple and very delicious," Billitteri said. "The natural flavors of the fish, lemon, white wine, butter and basil really make this dish special."

Combined with a glass of Pepperwood Grove Pinot Noir, diners have a culinary experience they aren't likely to forget anytime soon.

For a more heartier snapper dish, diners should try the snapper puttanesca. For this dish, Billitteri combines a fresh snapper filet with a red sauce with scallops and jumbo Gulf shrimp. The snapper is, again, placed on a bed of pasta, but the finished result is completely different from the snapper francese. This dish is much more bold and assertive and, when combined with a glass of Chianti—yes, a red wine—creates a zesty and peppery experience.

In addition, each meal is served with a cold and crisp salad on a chilled plate with a creamy, house Italian dressing and tender garlic rolls that you will make sure wind up in your "to go" box for lunch the next day. And, for dessert, La Dolce Vita's tiramisu is an impeccable way to end a meal at this small but impressive Italian restaurant. 