

# The Real Flavor of Italy

Arman DeLorenz has another hit on his hands in Nonna Rose, a restaurant named for his beloved grandmother.

BY LOYD MCINTOSH



Antipasto for 4

Named in honor of his beloved grandmother, Rose Civitallo DeLorenzo, renowned chef and restaurateur Arman DeLorenz's newest fine dining establishment, Nonna Rose Ristorante Italiano, has quickly become a destination for many diners hungry for authentic Italian cuisine. That authenticity not only comes from using the ingredients, styles and techniques that DeLorenz learned as a young boy in his Nonna's kitchen, but from a spirit of joy and kinship that was a part of growing up. So important is his past to the food that is prepared in his restaurant's kitchen that DeLorenz writes about his adored grandmother in the opening pages of the elegantly designed menu at Nonna Rose.

"My earliest memories of food are the wonderful smells emanating from the kitchen where Nonna was cooking for the family. I can, in my mind's eye, see Nonna, rolling pin in

hand, smoothing the pasta dough into thin sheets. She would then cut them into long thin strands and drape them on a clothes hanger to dry. Her sauce was rich in olive oil, parmesan cheese, garlic and fresh basil, that clung to the pasta without effort," DeLorenz writes. "Nonna nurtured us in the love of food and family. She was our protector...No one can compare with Nonna."

DeLorenz's intentions with Nonna Rose were to bring those authentic flavors and experiences to a magnificent new space on Montgomery Highway in Vestavia in the newly renovated Vestavia Center. Within weeks of its opening in February, Nonna Rose has become the prime dining spot Vestavians have hoped for for years. And, in return, the community has wrapped its arms around Nonna Rose and welcomed the new restaurant into its community.

Located in the space previously occupied by Sears and Parisian,

Nonna Rose is a bit deceiving when first viewing the space from the highway. Appearing from the outside to be a large, warehouse-style space, Nonna Rose is surprisingly intimate. Designed by Arman's wife, Susan DeLorenz and Marilyn Wilson, the interior of Nonna Rose captures the history and idealism of old-world Italy by combining such utilitarian materials as concrete and glass with rich woods and colorful works of art and other ambient touches around the space. In the end, Wilson and DeLorenz created a cozy atmosphere in spite of the open spaces and high ceilings that the space comprises.

With available seating for only 120 customers, the restaurant's tables are situated as such to take full advantage of an enormous, sweeping and graceful curved window that runs the entire length of the space and provides a stunning view of the action on Highway 31 in Vestavia. Additional seating toward the back of the space allows diners the opportunity to see Nonna Rose's kitchen staff in action in the restaurant's open kitchen.

All appetizers, entrees and desserts are prepared in full view, which gives visitors a chance to chat with the kitchen staff as they shuffle various pots and pans around and send plates full of genuine Italian fare to the main dining area. These are great spots to claim, especially if you're a serious food enthusiast or if you have trouble choosing items from a menu. Here, the staff just may pass along an assortment of samples—or Scooby Snacks as he likes to call them—to help you make up your mind.





Tiramisu

Nonna Rose has quickly developed a devoted and loyal crowd of regulars, many of whom, according to bar manager Alex Petix, have first-hand knowledge of authentic Italian food.

"This is where a lot of Italians in the area eat," Petix says. "Many of them come here and tell us this is how their grandmothers used to cook."

On any given day, you can find a crowd of regulars and newcomers alike gathered around the restaurant's bar, perhaps over a whiskey sour, a glass of wine or one of Petix's specialty martinis, swapping stories about old (and not-so-old) Birmingham. A white cosmopolitan—a combination of Skyy Citrus, Cointreau and lime juice with a "splash" of white cranberry juice—or the Eve's apple martini mixed from Van Gogh Apple Vodka, apple liqueur and lime juice, are just a sample of the Petix's perfect concoctions for

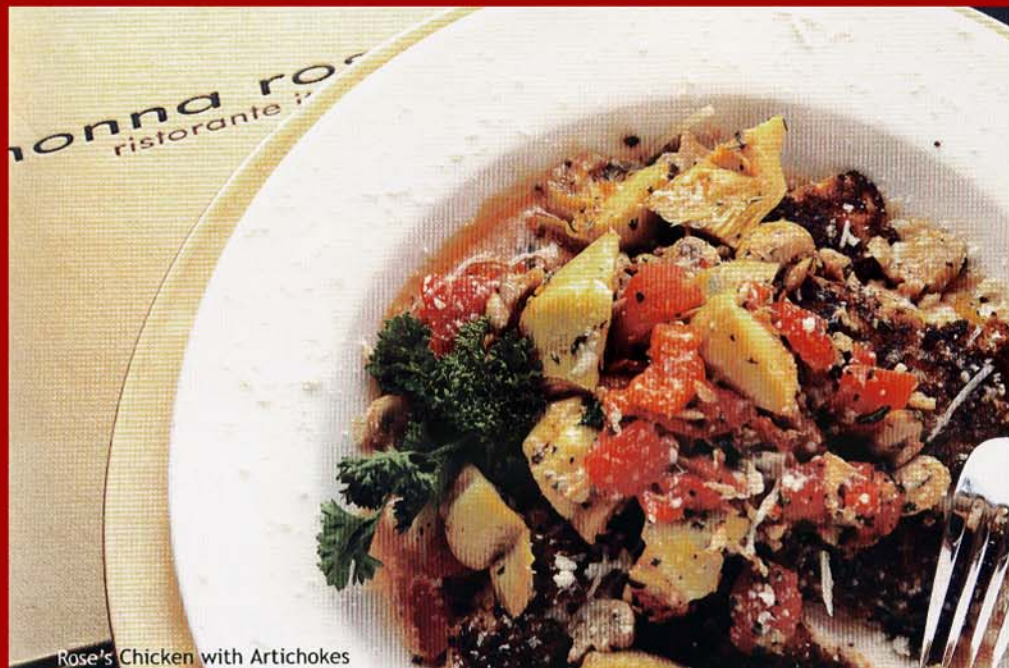
those hot, summer early-evenings. And, as the sun sets and evening gives way into night, Nonna Rose transforms itself into one of the most romantic and dreamy spots in town, without losing that sense of fun and hyper-kinetic energy that is brought not only to the restaurant's food, but to the dining room as well. The room becomes increasingly lively and exuberant as the evening rolls along and the dinner crowds gather. Originally hoping to capitalize on moviegoers at the Rave Theatre in the Vestavia Centre, Nonna Rose has become the destination instead of just a place to eat before or after doing something else. Former executive chef Chuck Guin (moved to Richmond, Virginia since this piece was written) attributes that characteristic to the sophisticated nature of Nonna Rose's guests, who, he says, understand and appreciate the emotional connection to a well-prepared meal and enjoy the entertainment value of a fine restau-

rant.

"The clientele here want to eat well and have a good time," Guin adds. "Nonna Rose is a very sensual and well-rounded dining experience." Being a well-rounded Italian restaurant means being capable of presenting a wide-ranging sample of the flavors and tastes from all over Italy. Rather than specializing in the flavors and styles of one particular region, Nonna Rose expertly blends the predominantly low-country ingredients and techniques of Southern Italy which incorporate more tomatoes and pork into their cooking with the more affluent flavors and styles of Northern Italy, which features more cream and white wine sauces.

"We do a mixture of Northern and Southern Italian. With the Southern influence, we do more of the red sauces and more low-country game. For the Northern Italian cuisine, we do more with creams, wines and butter sauces," Guin says. "Basically, it's





Rose's Chicken with Artichokes

## THE DETAILS: *Nonna Rose*

- Address: 700 Montgomery Hwy.
- Phone: 978-6878
- Hours: Mon-Fri & Sunday, 11-2 for lunch; every night 5 to close for dinner
- Private dining
- Take out available; call 978-9786
- Weekend reservations encouraged

Arman DeLorenz's restaurant, and he is Italian."

The Eggplant Stack Toscana, an appetizer featuring a towering array of fried eggplant medallions layered with lump crabmeat, boursin cheese and roasted pepper, is almost overwhelming to the senses. The creaminess of the sauce, the combination of fragrances from the golden-fried batter to the fresh herbs, and the sheer size of the dish almost make this eggplant creation suitable as an entrée. Paired with a Maculan Pino & Toi, a white Italian blend of Chardonnay, Pinot Grigio, Pinot Bianco and Tocai from the Veneto region of Northern Italy, this appetizer and wine combination gets the evening off to a great start.

The wine list at Nonna Rose is entirely made up of vintages from

Italy. Nonna Rose offers bottles ranging from the Taurino Salice Salentino, a red wine from "Italy's heel of the boot" that sells for \$18, to the Fanti Brunello di Montalcino, a wine made from 100 percent Sangiovese at \$82 per bottle.

The entrées on the menu at Nonna Rose include ingredients and flavors from every hill and valley of Italy. The menu includes pizzas prepared in the traditional Italian style; baked in a wood burning oven with extra virgin olive oil, roasted garlic and fresh basil. However, Nonna Rose fuses creativity with an adherence to tradition in dishes such as the wood-oven roasted grouper gremolata. Here, Nonna Rose's skilled kitchen staff roasts a grouper filet with jumbo lump crabmeat, and serves it over angel hair pasta with a light lemon

herb cream. This dish combines the richness and fullness of the cream sauce with the lightness of the grouper with fantastic results.

Rose's chicken with artichokes is a perfect example of a dish firmly embedded in DeLorenz's fruitful past. It is also one that the staff enjoys giving samples of to curious or indecisive diners. For this dish, a chicken breast is sautéed with artichoke hearts, wild mushrooms and fresh basil served over risotto with a dusting of shaved Parmesan cheese.

However, for a true taste of Nonna Rose, diners hungry for a rich Northern-Italian experience should try the veal picatta over angel hair pasta. This dish starts with a veal stock reduction that takes three full days to make. Starting with 35 gallons of stock, the concoction is reduced to five gallons before the reduction is ready. The result is dark and intense flavor that certainly gets your attention.

For dessert, the staff at Nonna Rose, from Guin and Petix to general manager Frank Lowden, without question suggests the white chocolate bread pudding. All of them guarantee to those who try this "ultimate indulgence" that they will never look at bread pudding the same way again.

"I've offered to buy back this dessert from people if they don't like it," Petix said. "So far, I've never had to do that." ☐

