



# MONTECATINI RISTORANTE & BAR

*A Taste of Quality Roma Dining in Downtown Walnut Creek*

BY TRICIA PIQUERO | PHOTOS BY TOM MINCZESKI

**On one fine May evening, we were able to sample the culinary excellence at Walnut Creek's Montecatini Ristorante. Each side dish and entrée was meticulously prepared from the finest and freshest ingredients.**

**M**ontecatini opened for business on October 17, 1989. Opening Day began with a bigger bang than expected because at 5:00, just as the staff was welcoming the initial dinner guests, the Loma Prieta earthquake struck. By closing time, the staff had served 26 diners in spite of the terror and confusion.

More than a quarter century has passed since that fateful day, and during that time, Montecatini Ristorante has taken its place as one of the icons of authentic Italian dining in Walnut Creek. Local citizens have established Montecatini as one of Central County's destinations for anybody seeking authentic Italian cuisine. It has become the favorite restaurant for a number of discriminating diners and has earned a number of awards for excellence during its 25-year history. For example, Open Table has acknowledged the restaurant's five-star quality by making Montecatini the 2015 Diners' Choice Winner for Italian Food in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Some residents frequent the restaurant on a weekly basis and have said that

Montecatini serves the best food in the Bay Area. One enthusiastic devotee declared that he had been dining at Montecatini for more than 20 years, and added, "It just gets better every time."

The extensive menu offers numerous mouth-watering dishes. A seafood entrée, the Fettuccine Alla Viareggina, is the most popular item on the menu. It is served with scallops, large prawns, bay shrimp, and fresh mushrooms in a tomato cream sauce. Some consider the Seppia Dore, which is a calamari steak served abalone style with white wine, and lemon, to be one of the best calamari steaks they ever tasted. The Scallops Al Limone — another favorite menu item — was served with lemon and white wine sauce. We tried this dish. Wonderful! We really enjoyed another seafood dish, the Insalata Di Pesce, which consists of Bay shrimp, calamari, and baby clams served with butter lettuce. The Lasagna Casalinga is soft, cheesy, and inviting with a rich tomato cream sauce. The delectable made-in-house Gnocchi is served with a choice of

sauses including pesto, pomodoro, or Bolognese. The Vitello Alla Parmigiana, served with mozzarella & Parmesan cheeses, and tomato cream sauce, is another entrée that diners have raved about. Chicken lovers often choose the Pollo Alla Schiacciata, which is a brick-pressed baked half-chicken served with rosemary and a garlic sauce. The Escargot is a somewhat uncommon appetizer for an Italian restaurant, but people who like the dish claim the Montecatini version to be excellent. Chef Ermes said the recipe was the same he served four decades ago at the Barracuda Restaurant, Baker Street, London, England.

The menu has enough choices to offer something new to diners even after many visits. In fact, the ability to find something new might never end because, in addition to the large variety of entrée selections, diners can choose one of four daily specials — or Piatti Del Giorno, as they are referred to on the menu. On the day of our visit, we were lucky enough to be served one of the specials — a Pork





Cutlet Sorrento consisting of a breaded bone-in pork cutlet, topped with mozzarella cheese, sun-dried tomato, fresh mushrooms, and demi-glace brown sauce, which tasted as good as it sounds!

Entrées are priced in a reasonable \$20-25 range, with pasta dishes from \$15 to \$20. One culinary technique Montecatini employs to attract and retain patrons is to serve the food in portions that some diners have claimed to be larger than they can remember seeing in any other restaurant. Some entrées are offered in two sizes. For example, a very popular selection, the Linguine/Capellini Al Pomodoro, is priced at only \$8.00 or, for the heartier appetites, \$14.

Regular customers rate the service to be of high quality equal to the food. Diners have been heard to comment that they couldn't remember better service anywhere. Hostesses, wait staff, and even bussers are always friendly and helpful. Staff members share the goal of ensuring that every Montecatini customer enjoys a satisfying dining experience. The two owners, Ermes Paulin, the executive chef, and Teresa Cheung, the general manager, encourage the culture of friendly helpfulness by deliberately cultivating a friendly atmosphere. They have created personal relationships with many of the regular customers and often greet them by name as they enter. The open kitchen is located in full view at the front of the restaurant and diners are encouraged to converse with the chefs while they are at work and to observe for themselves that dishes are being prepared using ingredients that come from a farm and not a can, and from the sea and not a freezer.

The extensive wine list offers 86 choices in four categories including Champagne and Sparklings, Vini Bianchi (white wines), Vini Rose, and Vini Rossi (red wines). Prices range from a \$24 bottle of White Zinfandel, Copper Ridge to a \$288 bottle of '04 Dom Perignon Champagne. In addition, Montecatini offers a menu of bar drinks including 17 specialty cocktails, five virgin "mocktails," and more than 100 brands of liquor and liqueurs.

Happy Hour begins each day when the doors open and ends at 6:30 in the evening

with discounted prices for wine labels including Italian classics and local favorites. Happy Hour wines are priced from \$5 for House Reds, Whites, and Brut Champagne. Premium wines are priced no higher than \$17.00. The Happy Hour menu also includes six-dollar Happy Hour Bites for an Antipasto Plate, Chicken Caesar Salad, Carpaccio with Arugula, or a Shrimp & Spinach Salad. If they care to, bar patron's can take advantage of the full dinner service. Wide screen TVs display current Bay Area sports events for customers in the lounge or at the bar indulging in a Happy Hour drink.

We spoke with the two owners, Teresa and Chef Ermes. They were not the original owners, but we learned that Chef Ermes has been Montecatini's executive chef since opening day. The restaurant owner, Kip Finn, was a neighbor to Teresa. Kip invited Teresa to a Christmas party in 2006, where he introduced her to another guest — Chef Ermes. The two were married four years later. Three years after that, Kip sold them majority share in the restaurant. Chef Ermes enjoys the fact that he now derives personal benefit from his hours of service in the kitchen and his unflagging commitment to maintaining the restaurant's high standards of quality and customer care.

Chef Ermes was born in Vicenza, Italy and at age 17 began his classical training at Enalc Hotel's Live & Raw Food Restaurant, which at the time was one of the world's finest culinary academies. Following graduation, he worked at some of the finest dining establishments in the world in such culinary centers as Rome and London. He also served for a time as chef on a Sitmar vessel, called Fairsea, that had been transformed from an unadorned migrant liner to a quality cruise ship. After immigrating to America, Chef Ermes served in several California restaurants in San Diego and the Bay Area.

Teresa was an engineer by profession with a B.S. in Chemical Engineering, Yale University, and an MBA from Cal State East Bay. She is a licensed Professional Engineer in Chemical Engineering. She grew up in the restaurant business, however, and as a







child worked at her parents' Los Angeles restaurant. Teresa brought her sense of fine dining, business skills, and vivacious personality to bear on her position as Montecatini's general manager. She made innovations in the restaurant operations including introducing the daily Happy Hour, Wine-by-the-Glass, and Beverage menus. Teresa put her engineering skills to use by installing acoustic absorbing paneling. After 25 years of doing things by hand, she instituted a computer-based Point Of Sale (POS) system to automate the billing and receipt printing operations.

Members of the staff apparently appreciate working at Montecatini as much as the guests enjoy dining there. Two current staff members were on site with Chef Ermes on opening day — Chef Raul Lopez and his brother, busser David Lopez. Others have seniority up to 14 years. Average tenure of all the staff is ten years.

I understand why Montecatini Ristorante is such a favorite with both diners and staff. It's become a favorite of mine, for sure. <sup>86°</sup>

*For more information, go to [www.montecatinirestaurant.com](http://www.montecatinirestaurant.com). Send comments about the article to [editors@86mag.com](mailto:editors@86mag.com).*