

# Chef Enlivens Giovanni's Fare

BY TOM BIVINS

I was asked to review Giovanni's restaurant for OITM's November issue. The truth is, chefs should not agree to submit restaurant reviews during foliage in Vermont. Bad idea! But the tourist season has ended and I am free to dine around again.

My spouse and I made the pleasant ride from Bethel to Ascutney for dinner at this new restaurant. We weren't exactly sure what to expect, as we have never spent any time in Ascutney. If you are looking for a charming local restaurant - serving good Italian food, reasonably priced, and with welcoming service - then I suggest visiting Giovanni's.

The owner of Giovanni's is John Moisis. From my perspective as a chef, John is the ideal owner: pleasant, observant, and very hands-on. John is open (as in forthcoming and way out of the closet), amusing, and very conscientious about his guests. He could not have been nicer or made us feel more at ease. We were seated promptly, and even though the restaurant was busy, John took time to visit with us. He volunteered information about his business, his history in the Bellows Falls area, and his plans for Giovanni's. Best of all, he had us laughing in no time.

The menu was simple and unpretentious. The food is not very different from most Americanized Italian restaurants: fried appetizers and soups, salads, pastas, grinders and pizzas. We ordered appetizers of fried calamari and Italian Wedding Soup with tiny veal and pork meatballs, a Greek salad, and two pasta dishes: chicken cacciatore and a grilled chicken and angel hair pasta.

The appetizers were hot and freshly prepared. The soup was

brothy and just right for the cold evening outside. The calamari was fried perfectly and served crisp with a warm marinara sauce. The portion size was just right. I ordered a Greek salad that was large enough for two people. It was lightly dressed and topped with lightly salted feta cheese, black, salty marinated olives without the pits, cucumbers and red onion. The lettuce was crisp and fresh, rather than the yellowed and limp iceberg lettuce usually served as part of a green salad.

The entrees were both served with red sauce. The chicken cacciatore was flavored with green peppers, garlic and onions. And as with most good Italian food, the chicken was more seasoning than main focus of the meal. The same was true of the grilled chicken. The portions were very adequate; the dishes were served hot. Afterwards, I ordered coconut cake for dessert, and John insisted on also sending over a complimentary slice of chocolate cake. Both homemade desserts were wonderful - just like mom used to make. They were rich and sweet without being cloying.

The service was a bit rushed, but the server made numerous efforts to ask about our food and our needs. The ambience of the restaurant was unpretentious, and there was plenty of lighting, white tablecloths, and candlelight. The background music was unobtrusive. It was a typical Vermont restaurant with one exception - John Moisis. He really made ours a dining experience worth repeating. Watching him make everyone comfortable - greeting them at the door, seating them, and thanking them at the end of their evening - makes me want a John for my restaurants! He spoke to every table and made sure the guests' needs were met.

In addition to a restaurant, there is a complete bar, and John is planning entertainment for the weekends (his 89-year-old

mother thinks the restaurant's success will be assured "if he brings the boys in!" Go PFLAG mom!!). John has a dance area set up with mirrored balls and lights, so I can imagine a neighborhood watering hole and restaurant that just happens to mingle straight couples with local lesbians and gays. With its dance floor, bar and multi-leveled seating, this will make a great place for a holiday or work party.

John Moisis makes no apologies for being gay, and doesn't need to. His guests are going to be well taken care of in every way. Good service and guest satisfaction are about making people comfortable and relaxed. Giovanni's makes the grade. For Southern Vermonters, and any gays or lesbians who want to be taken care of when dining out, take a ride to Ascutney!

Giovanni's can be found on the Old Route 5 in Ascutney, a short half-mile or so from Exit 8 of I-91. It is closed on Mondays and Tuesdays. Like all Vermont restaurants, early seating seems to be dominated by an older crowd and families, so you may want to consider going later in the evening. Give John a call at (802) 674-9400 with any questions about seating. Enjoy! ▼

*Tom Bivins is a chef-instructor at NECI Commons. He lives with his partner in Bethel.*



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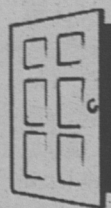
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