



MARIO'S

REVISITED
BY RICH BELMONT

I am a frequent diner at Mario's and have been going there for 30 years now. I consider myself lucky there is a place in Dubuque serving Italian cuisine just like the cooking of my Nonna (grandma) Maria, Aunt Ana and Uncle Guido. I enjoy Mario's so much it is the first restaurant I wrote about when *365ink Magazine* published my first *Argosy's Food for Thought* column in February 2010. Now after 155 restaurant reviews I am revisiting Mario's in this column.



For 40 years Mario's has been at the corner of 13th & Main serving Dubuque residents fresh, made-from-scratch food prepared from time tested recipes from the old country. The restaurant was established and is still operated by Tonio Mario

Bertolini and his beautiful wife and expert cook Angelina. Mario was born on a farm near Pescara in the Abruzzo (ah-BRUTT-so) region of Italy. Angelina grew up near the Bertolini farm. Mario started cooking for his family when he was very young. He perfected his cooking skills by working in fine restaurants throughout France and Italy. Before moving to Dubuque Mario and Angelina operated a restaurant in the Queens Borough of New York near JFK airport.

When you visit Mario's for the first time you will immediately notice the décor is circa 1970. But then you will quickly observe the place is filled with regular customers. As you look around you see many of those customers have obviously been coming here for most of those 40 years, too. And everyone who enters is treated like family.

You see, Mario understands people keep coming back for the food, not the surroundings. That's why in 1987 he personally designed and rebuilt the kitchen relocating it from what is now the back dining room. He installed new kitchen equipment and even lined the walls with stainless steel and waterproofed the entire kitchen. A new drainage system was constructed throughout so the space could be washed top to bottom. Mario says people told him he was crazy because the kitchen remodeling project cost \$400,000!



Of course, the restaurant is only as good as the people who run it. There is no doubt Mario and Angelina know how to cook Italian. But many of the kitchen staff have been here for a lot of years as well. Even Mario's and Angelina's son-in-law and Chief Cook,

Ryan Robinson, has been here for 8 years now. Ryan grew up on a farm in Southwest Iowa. He was a computer specialist both at Ruan Transportation Management Systems in Des Moines and in the Iowa Air National Guard. He also gained restaurant experience while working at Hardees and Pizza Hut.

Most of the front of the house staff has worked at Mario's for many years too. Debbie Gau, the Day Bar Manager, has been here 28 years and the Night Bar Manager, Bobbie Findley, has worked on and off here for most of the last 9 years. Some of the Servers have been here for many years as well: Tammy Madigan, 20 years; Monica Halverson, 19; Holly Thill, 10; Jessie Crowder, 7; and Kelly Burke, 3 years. Their longevity speaks volumes about the type of place Mario's is.



The pasta is imported from Italy. Many of the sauces are made from secret recipes handed down to Mario from his mother, Carmela. The basic sauce is Mario's Famous Homemade Tomato Sauce. It is made

from fresh, peeled tomatoes, celery, onion, carrots, tomato purée, oregano and basil. Every Monday Angie simmers a least one stock pot containing 75 gallons of this sauce and sometimes she has to have two pots going at the same time.



This sauce is used in many pasta dishes including Lasagna (lah-ZAH-nyah); Mostaccioli (most-a-cho-lee); Manicotti (mah-nee-KAWT-tee); and the always popular Spaghetti

and Meatballs. Angie's meatballs are wonderful. They are made from ground beef, eggs, bread crumbs, basil and other seasonings. The kitchen staff hand-rolls these balls from approximately 400 pounds of beef at a time. Ryan says he is developing carpal tunnel from these darn things but he has to eat at least one every day!

There are more than a few house specialties. The most famous are the Panzerotti and Calzone. Many people are confused by these pizza dough turnovers so here is the difference:



Panzerotti (pan-zah-RAHT-tee). This is filled with seasoned mozzarella cheese and your choice of any of the usual pizza toppings. My favorite includes green olives, pepperoni, sausage and ground beef. The Panzerotti is almost always deep fried but you can order it baked instead.

Calzone (cal-zone-nee). The main ingredient is ricotta cheese with a little mozzarella, Romano and parmesan cheese mixed in. Then you add your choice of pizza toppings. The Calzone is always baked.

When your server brings either of these gems to your table I recommend the first thing you do is cut it in half and separate the halves so it cools off a little.

The Pastas are all very good but some are true Italian masterpieces:



Vegetable Lasagna – made with layers of onions, celery, carrots, spinach, mushrooms and eggplant.



Eggplant Parmigiana – Mario has made arrangements to receive fresh eggplants all year. They are picked while still small so there are very few seeds.

Angelina's Tortellini – you choose beef or cheese or spinach and either red or white sauce.

Manicotti à la Abruzzese (ah-broot-SAY-zee) – this means the dish is prepared in the style of cooking of the Abruzzo region of Italy. Handmade crepes are filled with ricotta cheese and spinach and oven-baked in marinara sauce.



Grilled meat lovers are not forgotten at Mario's either. I have always said this is one of the best places in town for steaks. You can have your pick of char-broiled

T-Bone, New York or Top Sirloin steaks. Or you might enjoy my favorite: The Steak Pizzaiola (pizza-eye-ola). The word means "pizza style". A full pound of center cut sirloin is cooked in marinara sauce and dry wine. The steak is flavored by the tomato sauce and the sauce is flavored by the steak.

No self-respecting Ristorante Italiano would be without Vitello (veal) so of course Mario's has several veal specialties to choose from:



↑ Steak Pizzaiola



↑ Reasonable Snacks

Scaloppine (skah-loh-PEE-neh) – thinly sliced veal dredged in flour and sautéed with mushrooms and peppers in dry wine.

Marsala (mar-sal-ah) – sautéed with mushrooms in sweet Marsala wine.

Milanese (mil-an-ay-seh) – breaded and topped with butter and served with tomato sauce on the side.

Parmigiana (par-me-john-no) – the Italian word for parmesan, oven baked veal in Mario's tomato sauce and covered with melted mozzarella cheese.



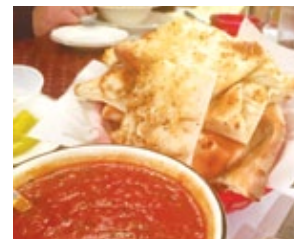
The frequent diners know the Specials are good reasons to visit Mario's during the week too. For example, Thursday at lunch is the time to get Mario's Reasonable Snacks. These are tender cubes of charbroiled sirloin served with seasoned lettuce and tomato. The

Tuesday and Thursday Night special is Pork Chop à la Mario. Two pork chops sautéed in red wine and banana peppers are simply wonderful. Wednesday night is really special because that is when we get Linguine Carbonara (leeng-GWEE-neh). The name of the pasta literally means "little tongues". These wide flat noodles are mixed with bacon, ham and parmesan cheese and topped with a cream and egg based white sauce.



Lunch is a good time to visit Mario's too. You can have your usual hamburger if you want. But how about something a little different like a Veal Cutlet or Meatball Parmesan sandwich? Or perhaps a tasty Italian

Sausage with peppers and onions. Many of the pastas are served in lunch size portions. Sicilian Salad with Pizza Bread is a satisfying light lunch, too.



May I suggest starting off your meal with Mario's famous Pizza Bread? You can order it plain or covered in mozzarella cheese with tomato sauce on the side. It is very garlicky and surprisingly addictive!

The wine list contains a variety of reasonably priced bottles. Some of my favorites include Ruffino Oruleto and Toresella Pinot Grigio white wines and Allegrini Valpolicella, Allegrini Palazzo Della Torre and Mario's recommended D'Alboia Chianti, all excellent choice reds.

And don't forget dessert! During our tasting session my team enjoyed a sampling of Tiramisu, Spumoni, Cannoli, Sinful Seven Chocolate Cake and Vanilla Ice Cream.

So stop by Mario's soon and say hello to Mario who is usually sitting at the bar. You might want to congratulate him on winning the 2016 Best Fest Best Place for Italian Cuisine Award for the 19th year in a row! Oh, and one more thing! When you visit around April Fool's Day wish Mario a happy birthday.

Buon Appetito!

MARIO'S

1298 Main St, Dubuque, IA
563-556-9424 • MariosOfDubuque.com

Hours: Bar: Mon-Sat: 11 AM-2 AM
Restaurant: Lunch: Mon-Sat: 11 AM-4:30 PM;
Dinner: Mon-Thu: 4:30-10 PM;
Fri-Sat: 4:30-11 PM; Sun: Closed

Dining Style: Friendly and comfortable

Noise Level: Conversational

Recommendations: Pizza Bread, Sicilian Salad, Pizza, Panzerotti, Mario's Reasonable Snacks, Baked Lasagna, Stuffed Shells Florentine, Linguine Carbonara, Veal Marsala, Veal Cutlet Parmigiana, Half Charbroiled Chicken, Broiled Salmon, T-Bone, New York Steak, Pork Chop à la Mario, Steak Pizzaiola, Spaghetti and Meatballs, Cannoli, Tiramisu

Liquor Service: Full Bar, Wine List of reasonably priced wines

Prices: Appetizers: \$3-\$16; Lunch: \$6-\$8; Dinner: \$11-\$25

Pay Options: Cash, Check, Debit, All Major Credit Cards

Accessibility: Ramp to dining room entrance

Kids Policy: Welcome. Kids Menu, High chairs and booster seats available

Reservations: Accepted for parties of 5 or more only

Catering: No • **Take Out:** Yes • **Delivery:** No

Parking: On street and parking lot south of building after 5 PM