



VALENTINO'S

Italian Cafe

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John Schmid/Times Photo Editor, photo@dailytimes.com

Valentino Berisha tosses a pizza crust in his restaurant Tuesday morning before the lunch rush.

Authentic Italian served up at Valentinos

By Carlina Villalpando
Times Living & Arts Editor

Valentino Berisha, owner of Valentino's Italian Cafe at 809 Sidney Baker St., means it when he says his food speaks for itself.

He's not ashamed that the crowds of people who frequent his restaurant come only for the food.

"They're coming to my place, knowing that it's small and not the most comfortable restaurant, but still they keep coming and waiting in line," Berisha said. "It's an honor for me to see them here."

He said it's no secret that there is a lot left to be desired about the restaurant's location, but once a guest gets a taste of his homemade rolls and dipping sauce or the baked lasagna, they forget about anything else. They're not there for atmosphere. They're there for the homemade, authentic Italian cooking, which has earned the restaurant best pizza and best Italian food honors.

"People go crazy for (the baked lasagna)," Berisha said, adding that other favorites are

the pizza, calzones, lobster ravioli and any of his fish, shrimp or chicken dishes.

What makes it different from other restaurants and pizza places is that "everything is homemade — from the dough to the pizza sauce," he said, adding that all of his cheeses are imported from Italy. He arrives every morning between 6 and 8 a.m. to begin preparation and does about 80 percent of the cooking himself, along with a cook, whom he has taught all of his recipes.

"The restaurant business is the toughest business you can be in," Berisha said. "You have to work really hard, because there are so many restaurants. If someone is willing to drive to come to your place and pass all of the other restaurants on the way, you have to do a very, very good job so they'll keep coming back."

Berisha grew up in Kosovo about 32 miles off the coast of Italy. He said he learned the art of Italian cuisine working for his family's business, Luigi's Cafe in Dallas,

cooking under Mario and Dino Smajli. He also learned the traditions of from-scratch pizza-making from brothers Benito and Dino of the renowned Lover's Pizza, also in Dallas. In Valentino's he has merged the best of both sides of his family's expertise in Italian and pizza cooking.

"All the food is like my mom or grandma use to make," he said.

Berisha moved to the U.S. about 14 years ago to attend college in Oklahoma, and he opened the Kerrville restaurant on Aug. 12, 2004, a year after opening a separate location in Fredericksburg.

"It was an immediate success," Berisha said.

Berisha said he currently is in the process of exploring possibilities of opening a location in Boerne and also is interested in remodeling or relocating his present location in Kerrville to better accommodate his guests.

"I would really love to make it nicer for my customers," Berisha said.

If there's anything other than the food that attracts customers to his restaurant, it has to be Valentino himself. Because of the kitchen's open design, there's seldom a visit when guests don't talk to him personally, either when he greets them at their table or waves from the kitchen. His welcoming and



joyful personality make up for anything the building might be lacking.

"I know I have the best customers, and I love talking to them," Berisha said, adding that he values their input and works hard to make sure everyone enjoys their experience.

"Sometimes, it's not 100 percent perfect, I but I do try to bring the food as near to perfection as I can," Berisha said. "I have had only two complaints in my life that I know of."

Valentino's menu features about 30 original items, along with weekend specials when Berisha regularly introducing new menu items.

"It changes every weekend. It's always different," he said.

Valentino's Italian Cafe is open 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Friday and from noon to 9 p.m. on Saturday. For information, call 257-2634.

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