

Hungry Minds

In this Italian class, students eat, drink and talk Italian

BY SARA KENNEDY

Before I see Roberto Alvarez, I hear his quiet, careful voice. Though he is obscured by towering shelves burdened with fancy culinary delights, I walk toward the sound. I pass fragrant loaves tucked beneath the front counter, beyond heavy shelves burdened with wine, away from the big pans of hot lasagna and the cooler sporting dozens of fresh cheeses. There in a nearly hidden dining room, Roberto Alvarez is facing a small group of people and slowly enunciating an Italian phrase -- "KOE-may see KYA-ma?" The people repeat it back to him. "KOE-may see KYA-ma. "What is your name?" Tampa's Castellano & Pizzo Italian Gourmet Foods isn't just a restaurant and deli tonight. It's doubling as a classroom -- an especially sensual one. The students echoing Alvarez and taking notes pause from time to time to sip wine and snarf steamy mouthfuls of pasta from the hot buffet table nearby.

One huge pan on the buffet cradles a nearly perfect version of "pasta fantasia." That's rigatoni bathed in creamy sauce and dotted with fresh tomato, verdant broccoli crowns and fat coins of bracciole -- sausage, pine nuts, raisins, ham and Romano cheese. Beside it is a frosty, chilled bowl of crisp Caesar salad, fresh pats of butter and a basket of handmade Italian bread.

When the students arrive, they are able to help themselves to dinner, heaping big spoonfuls onto paper plates. They sit at tables with cheery, green-and-white checked tablecloths, an imitation grapevine above sporting plastic grapes and fake hydrangea blossoms. Behind them, the deli's regular customers come and go, hauling take-out bags bulging with lasagna and rice pudding.

Italian music wafts from a CD player. Some of the students buy bottles of wine from the deli's collection, while others sip tea or soda. Halfway through the class, a waiter quietly makes his way among the tables, passing out tiny cups of fuchsia-colored, raspberry gelati.

what the word "prego" means (please, excuse me); and how to pronounce "gnocchi" (NYACKI), the word that denotes an Italian dumpling.

Alvarez also recommends easy-learn language books and provides audio lessons on his website. When his students feel ready to chat, they just call him up and yak in their new language.

He is happy to accommodate them.

"Italian is so rich -- everything about it is fun," he said. "I want to see them learn."

A similar class, but earlier in the day, meets Saturday mornings in Clearwater.

The Italian word for breakfast is "colazione," and the group munches pastries and downs coffee while learning

Italian at Panera Bakery at Feather Sound, 2285 Ulmerton Road.

At one time, Alvarez was a sports broadcaster, but he quit his full-time job at WTOG-Ch. 44 to pursue his passion: teaching the lilting Italian language and the history of his ancestors.

"It's a one-man crusade to keep our heritage alive," he explained after class.

"This was something I always wanted to do. I thought, 'If I put my heart and energy into it, I know there is an interest in it.'"

He is a private instructor, not affiliated with any college or university. He attracts students with convenient class hours and locations, a low-key approach and an emphasis on personal attention.

Currently, he teaches five classes in various parts of the Bay area, including Palm Harbor, Largo, St. Pete and Tampa.

The next series of classes starts in March.

The class at Castellano & Pizzo is his largest, maybe partly because the students appreciate the excellent meal and uniquely convivial atmosphere. Alvarez tacks an extra \$25 onto the \$150

regular cost of classes to pay for the buffet.

Paul Castellano, who represents the fifth generation of his family to operate the business in Tampa and Ybor City, hopes Alvarez' efforts will provide his already highly successful enterprise with a new dimension. The South Tampa restaurant

Such a civilized way to learn.

"I wanted to learn Italian, and it's a fun way to do it," explained Dr. Raphael Martinez, 30, a Brandon pulmonary physician who was among the students. "It's easier to learn phrases, it's less tedious than a regular class. It's more fun. And, you don't have to cook."

Another student, who plans to visit Italy in the future, said that she wants to be able to converse with the natives: "It's not a college environment. There aren't any grades, it's convenient, and a non-stressful environment, plus you get dinner."

She said she would like to learn how to order food in Italian, a subject Alvarez routinely addresses on this day, the third weekly session of a five-week course costing \$175 per person. By the end of the very first one-hour session, the class had already learned useful phrases for dining, like "il vino e buono" (the wine is good);

and deli specializes in fine grocery products from Italy, hot and cold take-out dishes, baked goods and breads, cold cuts, cheeses and wines, imported gourmet items like high-quality vinegars and olive oils. It also houses a popular catering service.

"Most of the students are customers," Castellano said after the class had left. "I thought it was a neat thing. They come to our café, they try our food, they learn a little Italian. It started a little slow, but all of a sudden, everybody jumped on it."

Food critic Sara Kennedy dines anonymously and the Planet pays for her meals. Contact her at 813-248-8888, ext. 116, or sara.kennedy@weeklyplanet.com.

Restaurants chosen for review are not related to advertising.