

That's Italian!

Casa Nuova finds new home in north suburbs

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After running five successful Italian restaurants in the Buckhead area for years, Antonia and Maria Fundora took a chance on the northern suburbs for their sixth venture.

In 1998, the two opened Casa Nuova ("new house") in Alpharetta, taking on a name that signified new beginnings in both business and life in Alpharetta.

At the time, North Fulton was just making the transition from sleepy Atlanta suburb to a vibrant dining destination, so the decision came with some trepidation.

"We were slightly afraid," Maria laughed, recalling the decision to uproot from their longtime home for the 'burbs. "We would drive through the surrounding neighborhoods, trying to assure ourselves that there would be enough people here to support our dream restaurant."

Twenty years later, the decision has paid off well, with the restaurant still drawing the same crowds who turned up in the early days and have continued to return.

"It started with knowing our customer base," said Maria. "We really went back to the basics of traditional Italian food, in a cozy, family-friendly [environment]."

The menu and atmosphere draw upon the couple's long history in the restaurant business. Antonio, who is the master chef, has been in the kitchen for more than 30 years, perfecting a menu that he knows his customers will love.



Maria, whom he married in 1987, grew up at the center of the restaurant world. Her father, Jose Llanes, was a longtime restaurateur in the Chicago area – a hub of authentic Italian cuisine.

"I have really never left the business," said Maria, who runs the front of the restaurant and attends to the business details of Casa Nuova.

The concept of Casa Nuova, which is located on Atlanta Highway, adheres to the basic formula of success – great food and drinks at an affordable price.

"We have tried to hold on to that goal of a family destination from the start," said Maria. "Of course we want to be the place people come to on special occasions, birthdays, and all, but we try to make anytime and everyday special for our customers."

The menu hits all the high notes for Italian food, including the "must try" items that Maria says are most popular. Those include fried calamari, Caesar salad, any veal dish ("the best in town," she adds), lasagna, chicken scarpafello, and grouper Francese.

About 10 years ago, chef Antonio began incorporating the farm to table approach, well before it became the trend. He planted a garden to help support the menu, and now fresh ingredients straight from the chef's garden are the standard for Casa Nuova.

Also homegrown are the recipes. Antonio began working in Italian restaurants as a young man in New York City and has perfected the recipes over the years. Maria notes her mother was also a great cook, especially with soups, and her recipes also form the base for the menu.

She loves that her customers constantly say they feel like they have been "transported to Italy" when they are at Casa Nuova.

"We really put love in our food and service," said Maria, noting there is very little staff turnover. "And we always recognize our [regular] customers the moment they walk through the door."

As an established business, Maria said the restaurant is very involved in the community, supporting local high school sports teams, animal welfare organizations, and numerous groups that support cancer patients and research.

"[Giving back] to the community is very important to us," said Maria. ■



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Casa Nuova
ITALIAN RESTAURANT