

Vive The French: New Naples restaurant serves honest food straight from the soul



Chefs hover over food, as one wearing red shoes walks quickly from one side of the kitchen to the other.

With his neatly cropped dark mane and close-cut facial hair, black-frame glasses halfway down his nose, the man of Sicilian descent instructs workers. It's apparent that he is the executive chef running the show at The French Brassiere Rustique.

Restaurant chef and partner Vincenzo Betulia has built what's simply known as The French, his latest culinary creation that opened earlier this year along Fifth Avenue South in downtown Naples. Betulia in January 2013 opened Osteria Tulia and Bar Tulia just down the street.

In the 230-seat The French, Betulia said, he wanted to create a special dining spot. He has, and The French will become a destination restaurant and boost Naples' culinary scene.

"When I build my restaurants, that's my first and foremost thought, the experience of the guests," he said earlier this week, sitting at one of the restaurant's white-and-black marble tables. "It's a feeling, it's a soul, it's a vibe. It's more than just going out to dinner and going home."

Betulia said he and his wife, Anna, traveled to Paris three years ago for four days. They had made reservations for the finest restaurants in one of the world's greatest cities, and he decided to cancel them all.

Instead, he told Anna, he wanted to eat casually in the European city. They did and, before leaving, he asked people at each where to eat next.

They also studied the look they wanted to create, and Betulia called The French a relaxed setting. He wanted to create a traditional French brasserie, a place where food is served all day long.

"The whole point of a brasserie is to make it feel casual and welcoming to everyone," he said.

Betulia achieved that. Wooden French chairs sit at every marble-top table. Red-leather booths complement the look, along with simple murals on the wall that include one of Betulia and Anna enjoying a picnic in the park. The floor is white tile with black accents; the bar has seating inside and out.

Patrons who want to eat outside may do so at table along Fifth, or they can head inside to watch staff prepare meals, as anything from French music to Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On?" is piped through the speakers.

And his idea behind the menu was similarly basic. He called the menu an interpretation of classic dishes with no more than five ingredients, so diners can taste every flavor of a meal.

"I'm not reinventing the wheel," he said, adding that he'll implore guests to simply "taste what's on the plate, taste what's there."

Celebrity chefs on television in recent years have sought to continually up their game with exotic recipes, Betulia said.

Chef Vincenzo Betulia created the restaurant, Florida's first traditional French brasserie. The French pays homage to "quintessential Parisian brasseries at the turn of the 19th century," reads The French's website, thefrenchnaples.com. Dave Osborn/Naples Daily News

If nothing else, Betulia will keep the weight off because he walks between his two restaurants daily and puts in more than 100 hours a week.

Even so, it's not work to him, he noted.

I don't see it as a business. I see it as a representation of myself," Betulia said.

His passion for food is obvious, a perfectionist who expects the same from his employees. In January, three weeks after opening The French, Betulia said he fired his entire kitchen staff.

"They didn't have the passion to put it on the plate," he said.



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Loralee LeBoeuf, from left, Patti Holben and Edie Harvey peruse the lunch menu on Tuesday, May 9, 2017, at The French Brasserie Rustique on Fifth Avenue South in Naples. The three friends from Naples were celebrating Holben's birthday at The French. (Photo: Katie Klann/Naples Daily News)

Born in Sicily, Betulia came to the U.S., to Milwaukee, with his parents when he was 2 years old. Once he began studying the art of cooking, Betulia met renowned Milwaukee chef Paul Bartolotta, who became his mentor. Bartolotta opened Spiaggia, considered the top Italian restaurant in Chicago and among the best in the U.S.

Bartolotta opened a chain of restaurants in Milwaukee, including the Lake Park Bistro, a French eatery, and Betulia said he learned firsthand about how to create wonderful food and restaurants.

"I'm just following exactly in his footsteps," Betulia said.

Sitting outside one sunny weekday, Jerry and Elaine Locklear of were visiting from Jupiter on Florida's east coast and had made their second visit to The French. They described the expansive menu and reasonable prices for the fine food they received.

"The food is fresh, and it's really good. It's very light," said Jerry, also a chef. "A lot of love goes into it."

Betulia, 41, said response from diners has been mainly positive. Tourists from Lyon, France, said it was the most French-tasting food they've enjoyed yet in the U.S. The French's onion soup tasted just like what one diner said she had enjoyed in Paris. The beef shortrib bourguignon, with braised carrots, onions and pureed potatoes, that another diner who grew up in the Midwest said tasted a lot like his mom's pot roast.

Betulia calls it "taste memory."

"That's all I'm looking for," he said.

"What we're doing is we are touching your soul, in some weird way," he said. "In the end, we want to serve simple, honest food. Our goal is to make everyone happy."

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Photos: Lunch at The French Brasserie Rustique

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Chef Vincenzo Betulia prepares a cheese plate during lunch on Tuesday, May 9, 2017, at The French Brasserie Rustique on Fifth Avenue South in Naples. Katie Klann/Naples Daily News