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By Pete Genovese

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N.J.'S BEST ITALIAN RESTAURANT: WHERE AN 84-YEAR-OLD GRANDMA MAKES THE GNOCCHI

Don't mess with grandma when it comes time to make the gnocchi.

Filomena DiVentura may be in her mid-80s, but only one person makes the gnocchi at Filomena Lakeview in Deptford and its sister restaurants in West Berlin and Clementon.

"Every Sunday, at all three restaurants," says daughter-in-law Donna DiVentura, whose husband, Mauro, is the chef at Filomena Lakeview.

The sprawling Deptford restaurant — seating capacity of 350, upstairs and downstairs dining rooms and bars, outdoor patio, a parking lot bigger than most small towns — was a stop on our search for N.J.'s best Italian restaurant.

We started by asking readers for nominations; 450 restaurants were placed on the ballot, and the top five vote-getters in each of four regions, plus my 20 selections, made up our 40 semi-finalists. Here is the day-by-day schedule of our visits. I'll file reports every five restaurants, and watch for sidebar stories on the eternal sauce vs. gravy question, how to speak New Jersey restaurant Italian, etc. One restaurant will be featured in every report; the profile does not mean the restaurant has an inside track to being one of our ten finalists.

Filomena Lakeview started as a stagecoach stop in the 1700s. Original fireplaces, beams and stonework remain; the overall effect is colonial American, with a considerable side order of Italian.

Filomena's hand-rolled gnocchi, with mini heirloom tomatoes, fresh basil, extra virgin olive oil and parmigiano cheese, are a must, but good luck from there, because the menu is huge, with scores of dishes available at lunch and dinner. Mauro may be the chef and co-owner, with his wife, but there's no doubt who still carries the biggest stick, or rolling pin: at least a half dozen dishes are named after the spry octogenarian — Filomena peppers and warm Italian bread; Antipasto Filomena, Filomena's B&B burger, Filomena cheeseburger, crab cakes Filomena, and stuffed pork chops Filomena.

The family matriarch comes from Abruzzi, east of Rome on the Adriatic coast, which accounts for the gnocchi — longer, more tube-like, than the gnocchi found in most Italian restaurants.

It was my favorite dish here — and no, grandma was not leaning over the table waiting for my decision. At every stop in our epic search for the state's best Italian restaurant, I am trying one appetizer, three main dishes and one dessert, to keep an even playing field.

The eggplant meatballs here are a tasty twist on the Italian standard. Goat ragu — the first time that sauce or dish made an appearance on this mission — is a hearty helping of braised goat, roasted vegetables, goat cheese and house made pappardelle.

We've been running into a lot of short ribs on this journey; the short ribs agrodolce here are a big-enough-for-two feast of beef ribs, balsamic, honey, whole grain mustard sauce, sauteed escarole, black truffle and soft polenta.

OTHER RESTAURANTS VISITED

La Piazza, Allentown. Don't mistake this popular small town spot for a mere pizzeria; everything from caprese salad, portobello alla griglia (portobello topped with crabmeat and mozzarella) and rice balls to gambieri pescatore (tiger shrimp in garlic and oil over linguine) grace the expansive menu.

The pork osso bucco, a tower of sauce-covered meat atop gnocchi — made for a first-rate photo op and even better eating. I'm trying to stay away from such cliched Italian-American dishes as calamari and chicken parm on this mission, but the calamari mondello (fried calamari tossed in hot cherry peppers, garlic and capers in a white balsamic wine sauce) was a different spin on the restaurant standard.

Toscana Ristorante, Bordentown. A luncheon meeting filled the dining room when we stopped here, so photographer Saed Hindash and I headed to the bar, a state of mind we were somewhat familiar with during our epic search for N.J.'s best bar last winter. Zach Melker is the chef at Toscana; his dad John, and John's sister, Dawn Antinoro, and her husband, John Antinoro, are the owners. Zach's brother-in-law, as it turns out, runs Dozzino in Hoboken, in the top ten in my latest N.J. Pizza Power Rankings.

Emma's Meatballs, two giant beef, veal and pork-filled creations, are a must, as are the homemade gnocchi osso bucco, the Toscana pescatore (shrimp, scallops, mussels, clams and calamari in choice of sauce) and the butterfly pork chops, a dish that had our photographer straining for superlatives. Try the lemoncello tiramisu for dessert.

ITA101, Medford. You can come home again, especially when a storefront opens in your home town and you've spent 14 years in Italy as a chef and miss home. That's Kevin Maher's story; he's the chef at ITA101. The name? Stands for Italian 101; Maher cooks authentic dishes from throughout Italy.

"You can go a mile either way and get chicken parm," Maher says inside his busy kitchen.

Which means no chicken parm on his menu, instead such dishes as bietole arrosto con Stracciatella (roasted beets and housemade stracciatella in a grilled orange vinaigrette) and pappardelle con ragu di cinghiale (handmade pappardelle tossed in a slow-cooked wild boar ragu).

Order the tiramisu, theatrically prepared tableside, you'll thank me later.

Battello, Jersey City. Ryan DePersio is amassing a New Jersey restaurant empire; the co-founder of Fascino in Montclair also helps run the newly opened Kitchen Step in Jersey City, Nico Kitchen + Bar in Newark and Battello, perched dockside in the Newport Yacht Club + Marina with an unbeatable view of the Manhattan skyline.

DePersio says his gnocchi and polenta fries are the two dishes "that made me who I am today," and the gnocchi are a pillowy pasta from Italian food heaven, resting in sweet-sausage-accented bolognese sauce. The popcorn-dusted octopus is a recommended appetizer, and the pancetta-wrapped scallops, comfortably resting atop quinoa, raisins and Sicilian olives, turns that commonplace Jersey Shore standard into something special.

Peter Genovese may be reached at pgenovese@njadvancemedia.com. Follow him on Twitter at @PeteGenovese or via The Munchmobile @NJ_Munchmobile. Find the Munchmobile on Facebook and Instagram.