

RESTAURANTS NAVIGATING THE PANDEMIC

BY MARC RASPANTI

A Neighborhood Treasure

For over 34 years, Michael Granato and his wife Joette Adams have stewarded meticulously an iconic Italian treasure nestled less than 50 yards from the epicenter of Headhouse Square in earshot of the historic Shambles dwelling. **Bistro Romano** is located at 120 Lombard Street in the heart of Society Hill. Although Bistro Romano has been around for 34 years, the building itself goes back to the 18th century. It shares a rich history, typical of early Philadelphia, first as a vinegar factory and later as a granary.

It was transformed by Mr. Granato into a regional Italian restaurant specializing in ever-changing Italian cuisine. The menu takes advantage of seasonal freshness, local ingredients and, wherever possible, sustainable ingredients. To the delight of guests, Executive Chef Steven Howells is constantly experimenting. Pastas are all homemade and extraordinary. Classic veal, pork, lamb, beef and fresh seafood dishes have been creatively transformed.

The main restaurant and intimate bar can seat over 120 people. However, the upstairs private room, newly and beautifully renovated in a Tuscan wine theme, can hold 100 people for a special candlelight dinner or 175 people for a lively cocktail party with butlered hors d'oeuvres and music.

Bistro Romano prides itself on its impressive wine collection. Its wine cellar holds over 800 carefully curated selections. The restaurant is the proud recipient of the prestigious *Wine Spectator* Best of Excellence Two Glasses Award. Only six restaurants in the City of Philadelphia can boast such an impressive achievement. It has also been listed in the *Best of Philly Condé Nast Traveler* as one of Philadelphia's most romantic restaurants. Bistro also boasts a unique wine shoppe that stocks over 125 selections at competitive prices.

Bistro Romano is well-known for its wine tastings, paired with epicurean treats, that were held all through the pandemic at Headhouse Square. They are now being held at its newly renovated, and quite exclusive, wine room. The signature wine dinners are very popular, fill up quickly and, frankly, are good value.

The downstairs restaurant is a grotto-like setting, which takes advantage of the original distressed stone and brick work. It is an intimate candlelit space. The upstairs bar area, which is a favorite to locals who frequent Bistro Romano, is captivating. As soon as you enter the bar, you will see a massive hand-carved sea nymph that appears at first glance to be chiseled marble. It is actually glazed



The upstairs bar area features hand-carved sea nymphs that came from a Great Lakes schooner built at the turn of the century.

wood and was extracted from a Great Lakes schooner built around the turn of the century. It invites guests to dine in the bar area for a robust selection of Italian meats, cheeses, mussels or grilled octopus while enjoying a bottle of wine, one of their handcrafted cocktails or homemade cellos by master mixologist Sean Foyle. There is adequate seating around the bar to make for cozy events while enjoying piano music on holidays and weekends. Bistro recently renovated its street curb area and added several cute tables along with embedded lighting. This is a perfect spot for people-watching in the summer.

While COVID-19 was devastating to all restaurants in Philadelphia, the Bistro's owners are proud of the fact that they kept the restaurant open, one way or another, and employed as many members of their staff as possible. This was done through a series of outside events hosted at the Shambles, a robust and creative takeout service and wonderful neighborhood personal delivery services.

Michael and Joette not only kept the restaurant open during the height of the pandemic, but invested in a state-of-the-art HVAC system which boosted the circulation of air from outside the restaurant to provide their guests with the greatest amount of comfort and protection. This is quite an engineering feat for a building of its age. Bistro follows all state and city COVID-19 protocols, and all staff have been vaccinated.

Lastly, Bistro is well-known for its special Valentine's Day dinners and candlelight Christmas Eve dinners, as well as festive New Year's Eve offerings. General Manager Victor Valles, Executive Chef Steven Howells and their team go all out to make sure Bistro Romano's guests are kept happy.

