

Dining Out

Italian Fare
Family Style

By Ray Palma

"I thought the summer was over, but I'm still so busy," said Nick Vamvakitis, owner and chef at one of the most enduring restaurants in the Hampton Bays area, La Casserola.

"Friday night was the busiest Friday night I've had," said the restaurateur who has been in charge of the Italian family-style restaurant since 1993. "It was busier than it was on any summer Friday night."

With the change of seasons, La Casserola has been extra busy catering parties in the weeks since Labor Day. "It started last year around this time," Mr. Vamvakitis said. "When I first opened up, we hardly did any parties. I had to turn down weddings that people wanted to hold on Saturday nights because we were so busy."

The success of the restaurant has led Mr. Vamvakitis to seek expansion. He is about to file applications for building permits for a new 150-seat addition, bringing the seating capacity at the restaurant to about 350. Southampton architect Diane Harold has been hired to help design a new garden room with huge windows.

Planned is a top-to-bottom remodeling of both the inside and outside. Outside the garden room window the view will include a new landscape design



Chef and owner Nick Vamvakitis in the dining room of La Casserola. —Ray Palma

that incorporates man-made waterfalls. The garden room and its views are intended to bring a whole new feel to the restaurant in the spring and summer; the other side of the new room will still house the fireplace to help enhance the fall and winter ambiance.

The dining area décor currently features red carpet, striped curtains and paneled walls. Mr. Vamvakitis remains optimistic about opening up the new section in about a year.

The family-style menu is a big draw, the chef and owner said, because many diners enjoy ordering one or two dishes for the whole table to enjoy. The selection is largely the same as was offered on the original menu, with a few changes. "The quality of food is always getting better here," Mr. Vamvakitis said. The chef now uses a more tender cut for veal entrées, which start at \$16.95. For the chicken dishes, starting at \$14.95, the chef is now using larger chickens, reflecting an across-the-board increase in the size of portions.

Other dishes include such pasta staples as spaghetti with marinara sauce (\$12.95) and linguine with shrimp and clams in a red or white sauce for \$16.95. Fresh seafood entrées include fried calamari (\$16.95) and seafood marinara or fra diavolo (\$19.95). Non-meat eaters can choose from dishes such as escarole with garlic and oil (\$8.95) or broccoli rabe with garlic and oil (\$12.95).

The take-out business is booming, Mr. Vamvakitis proclaimed. "Sometimes you come to the bar and it's all filled with take-out," he said. He has considered, he said with a laugh, creating a whole separate room just for the take-out orders.

With a modest shrug of his shoulders and a big smile, he said in an interview at the restaurant last week that, "My customers always tell me that my place reminds them of a restaurant in Manhattan that I've never been to, Carmine's. 'It's the Carmine's of The Hamptons,' they tell me."

The most popular dish this year is an eight-piece serving of lamb chops (\$45) in a rosemary sauce with roasted sliced potatoes. Other favorite en-

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- 336 Montauk Highway, Hampton Bays
 - Most major credit cards accepted
 - Open six days a week, closed Tuesday
 - Wheelchair accessible
 - Reservations for parties of 8 or more
 - 728-7254

trées include the zuppa (\$29.95) which serves about three to four people: a seafood plate with mussels, clams, shrimps, salmon and a lobster tail over a bed of linguine. New to the menu this year is a fillet of salmon entrée served on a bed of spinach with lump crab meat (\$29.95).

Mr. Vamvakitis said he has thought

A top-to-bottom remodeling is planned.

about changing the appetizers but "everybody comes back for the same items they loved the time before," like the Portobello mushrooms in a white wine sauce (\$12.95). One new choice is the shrimp imperial appetizer (\$25.95): eight jumbo shrimps stuffed with fontina cheese and wrapped with bacon, served in a Dijon sauce.

Diners can finish up at La Casserola with one of the restaurant's most popular desserts, tiramisu (\$5.95). A new addition to the dessert menu is the peach melba (\$5.50): half peaches served with vanilla ice cream, fresh whipped cream and raspberry syrup.

Ram's Head Wine Dinner

The Ram's Head Inn on Shelter Island will present its traditional Long Island Autumn Wine Dinner on Friday, September 24 at 7 p.m. The dinner features six courses prepared by chef Thomas Ritzler accompanied by wines from five featured Long Island wineries. The dinner costs \$58.50 per person, plus tax and gratuity, and reservations are required.

The Seasonal Chef

'Tis the season for broccoli and cauliflower. Both are members of the cruciferous family and closely related to the cabbage clan.

Cauliflower and broccoli contain a fair amount of vitamin C and are a reasonable source of iron, but broccoli adds another healthy quality to its list of credentials: it's high in vitamin A. These days, my daily diet includes both of them in one form or another.

When I want bright green and crunchy broccoli, I cook it in boiling water or steam the florets for a few seconds, then plunge it into ice-cold water to stop the cooking process and use it for garnish, in salads, or crudite.

Braised vegetables, on the other hand, have a muted color and softer texture. The flavor ends up being more palatable and there are those who claim slowly cooked vegetables release their nutrients so they are more easily digested and absorbed into the bloodstream.

For cauliflower, Escoffier suggests the following method: "Leave whole with the first two rows of leaves attached. If the cauliflower is bitter, soak in cold salted water for up to one hour. Then in a large pot of boiling salted water, cook the whole cauliflower until tender, 30 minutes. Plunge the cauliflower into ice water to stop the cooking process. Drain and arrange it on a napkin to absorb any moisture." Nothing in the nearly past 100 years has changed much. Most cooks follow his technique and proceed according to the recipe. Bon appetit!

Escoffier's Chou-Fleur à la Milanais*

Place the cooked and well drained cauliflower in a buttered dish sprinkled with grated cheese. Sprinkle the cauliflower also with grated cheese, add a few small pieces of butter and gratin in the oven.

On removing from the oven, coat the cauliflower with a little brown butter and serve immediately. Or sprinkle with chopped parsley and fine white bread crumbs that have been browned in four ounces of butter until golden brown.

*Adapted from *Le Guide Culinaire*, A. Escoffier, 1907 Mayflower Books.

Indian Style Cauliflower (Serves 6)

- 1 large head cauliflower, cut into large florets
- 1/4 cup ghee (clarified butter) or oil
- 2 teaspoons coriander seeds
- 1 jalapeno chile, seeded and minced
- 1 small onion, minced
- 1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1/2 teaspoon ground turmeric
- 3 medium firm, ripe tomatoes, peeled, seeded and chopped
- juice of 1 lemon
- 1/4 cup chopped fresh cilantro or flat leaf parsley
- coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper

TASTY TIP: To make ghee or clarified butter (the milk solids are separated and discarded, leaving only the pure butterfat): In a heavy saucepan over medium heat, gently cook 3/4 pound of unsalted butter. When the foam begins to subside and little golden brown specks start to form in the butter, about 15 minutes, remove the pan from the heat. Strain the butter through a fine-mesh strainer or coffee filter. Ghee keeps for up to one

minutes. From time to time pan to be sure it is not dry; if so, add some water.

Add the lemon juice and taste. Sprinkle with cilantro and serve at once.

Cauliflower Frittata (Serves 4)

- 5 whole eggs plus 3 egg whites
- 3 tablespoons grated cheese
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh herbs
- serve 2 teaspoons for garnish
- 1 tablespoon snipped chives
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- freshly ground black pepper
- 3 cups cauliflower florets (tender but firm)
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- coarse salt

To prepare:

In a mixing bowl and whisk, beat the eggs and egg whites together with the cheese, pepper. Stir in the cauliflower.

Preheat the broiler to high.

In large, oven-proof non-stick pan, over medium heat, add the mixture and reduce the heat. When the foam subsides, add the cauliflower. When the eggs are set on top but the top is still runny, add a pinch or two of salt. Shake to jiggle the eggs.

Place the pan under the broiler. Cook the pan to evenly brown about one to one-and-a-half minutes.

When the eggs are set, cook—remove from the broiler.

Slide the frittata onto a platter. Let stand at least 5 minutes before serving, dust the chopped fresh herbs. Cut into wedges and serve with crusty bread.

Slow-Cooked Broccoli and Olive Oil (Serves 4)

- 1 head broccoli
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 3 large garlic cloves, minced
- 1/4 cup water
- 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
- coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 1/2 cup pine nuts, toasted

To prepare:

Cut the florets off the broccoli. Cut the smaller stems just above the "blossom." Peel the stems.

Parrish Park

Reservations are being accepted now for the Parrish Art Center's "Brandywine Holiday Tour" of the gardens, homes and museums of Pennsylvania's Brandywine region, including Winterthur, Delaware, and the N.C. Wyeth Studio.

This two-day/one-night tour explores Longwood Gardens, a 1,050-acre estate with indoor and outdoor gardens, including four acres of historic houses. A Yuletide buffet and entertainment is included.

The second day begins with a viewing of its American art collection and the N.C. Wyeth Studio, both located in Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania. The day concludes with a visit to the Winterthur Museum, Delaware, where more than

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