

Aida hits high notes with wines on tap

By Father Leo Patalinghug

Aida Bistro & Wine Bar isn't named after Verdi's classic opera. It refers to the mother of the owners, Joseph and Mary Barbera (two other classic names of biblical proportions).

The Barberas, active parishioners at St. Louis in Clarksville, came to the restaurant scene as a way to bring some good news into this world, especially after the tragedies of Sept. 11, 2001.

Without any formal restaurant training - except the training that comes from a family inspired by their passions for good food, Catholic values, generous service and a deep appreciation for fine wines - they have found a niche that's hitting high notes in the local and national food scene.

For 11 years, Aida has gathered enthusiastic crowds seeking classic Italian and other gastro-fusion plates. But what makes Aida extra special is its largest variety of "wine on tap" in Maryland and second largest in the country.

View Father Leo's video review of Aida as he discusses the food, service and atmosphere.

The restaurant's thematic earth-tone colors evoke a classic Tuscan feel in a modern setting, a reprieve for office park workers in Columbia. The location means an active lunch service during the day with easy access and plenty of parking after office hours. Two large separate dining areas are complemented by a bar area with tables, and even a private chef's table for closer cooking action.

Aida's energy level is quite high. While it can get loud in the dining areas, patrons feel very much at home - similar to an Italian family's kitchen table.

The eclectic menu offers a combination of familiar foods with some fusion dishes. The meals are thoughtfully executed and attractively plated. Traditional Italian sauces complemented fresh pastas cooked perfectly al dente. Infusing truffle oil to the caprese elevated the taste of the traditional mozzarella, tomato and basil antipasto. Dishes such as spicy popcorn shrimp and salmon tempura offered a fun Asian-fusion flavor.

Aida's "farm-to-table" philosophy means fresh flavors, quite evident, for example, in the locally grown beet salad and other greens.

The veal scaloppini with Genoa salami, melted provolone and tomato butter sauce

had a unique tartness that lightened the dish. Scale and shellfish dishes were well prepared with complementary sides. Happily, the chef was even willing to interchange a seasoning for special seafood request, and did it quite well. The rest of the menu, from the different plate portion options, flat breads as an appetizer to share or a main course, as well as homemade desserts – including homemade cannoli – give diners tasty options.

By providence, my visit to Aida coincided with Aida's birthday. It was edifying to see the Barbera family come together to celebrate family life, hard work, good food, great wines and family friendly service with a smile. This family restaurant combines food, faith, family and fun. In the modern pop-culture food scene, filled with pop-food fads with little soul, Aida's, even after only 11 years, is classic, classy and worth multiple visits.

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