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In This Issue

[Home > Food and Wine >](#)

From the Editor

Food and Wine

Shopping

Travel

Arts & Culture

Business Directory

A Good Word

After Hours

Community Spirit

What's Happening

Online Quiz

Kingston Relocation Guide

Media Kit

Quick Search:

[Search](#)

[Advanced Search](#)



FOOD AND WINE

luscious lasagna

roll up your sleeves . . . and savour



PASTA GENOVA

BY JOSEPHINE MATYAS | PHOTOGRAPHY BY BERNARD CLARK

Lasagna may be the quintessential comfort food. Filling, deeply flavoured, almost limitless in variety, it does the job for a special occasion or a weekday family dinner.

The upside is that this classic baked dish has a seductive taste and texture where ample amounts of sauce, cheese and filling meld into a satisfying, chin-wiping culinary experience. The downside is that most of us view making lasagna as a bit of a marathon cooking session packed with decisions. Pasta: fresh, dried or pre-cooked? Sauce: red or white, meat or vegetarian? Cheese: don't even go there — the choices and combinations are staggering. And a sink full of cooking pots when the whole process is over.

Perhaps this is why restaurants came into being. When the choices are overwhelming and time is limited, local chefs can do the grunt work and all you need to do is decide to be a bit adventurous (mushroom lasagna, anyone?) or not (classic Sicilian meat sauce, cheese and pasta, layered and baked). And in this regard, Kingston has a full menu of choices: sit down and eat in-restaurant or take home a tray of lasagna and pop it into your own oven.

Buon appetito! Tutti a tavola a mangiare (all to the table to eat).

DISHES FEATURED



Windmills



East Side Mario's



Pasta Genova

Frankie Pestos

Every Kingston pasta lover knows Virg Allegrini. The affable owner of downtown's Pasta Genova (now celebrating 20 years in business) minces few words when describing the success of his homestyle lasagna: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." To wit, that is why Pasta Genova has been cooking up the same lasagna recipe from day one of opening the doors.

Not a restaurant, Pasta Genova is a purveyor of all foods genuinely Italian. Want home-baked focaccia bread fresh from the oven? Check. Advice on choosing olive oil? Check. The best-quality Parmesan Reggiano? Fresh pasta in sheets, curls, shapes or long strands? Check, check. It's those delicious sheets of fresh pasta that are used as the base for Pasta Genova's meat and vegetarian lasagnas. The ingredients are combined from scratch and assembled into dishes, and all you have to do is bake it to a golden brown.

There's a trio of signature homemade sauces that make Pasta Genova's lasagna such standout meals. "We use our meat sauce and béchamel in our meat lasagna and our tomato sauce and béchamel together in our vegetarian lasagna. Otherwise, they are the same," Allegrini explains. "The tomato sauce has chunks of vegetables in it — carrots, onions, red and green peppers, and celery. It's a nice tomato sauce on its own, but it makes a great lasagna.

"The meat sauce is a combination of ground chuck and ground pork with fresh herbs, olive oil, carrots and onion. The key to all our sauces is the fresh herb mixture — basil, Italian parsley, garlic, rosemary and sage. They are essential; the sauces wouldn't taste the same without the fresh herb mixture. Dried herbs just don't cut it."

At assembly time, the lightly cooked fresh sheets of pasta are covered with a swirling together of either the tomato or meat sauce, and the shop's homemade béchamel sauce (enhanced with the sharpness of black pepper and freshly ground nutmeg), then topped with a generous sprinkling of high-quality Parmesan and mozzarella cheeses. "The better your cheese, the better your lasagna," advises Allegrini. The layering is repeated four times, and finally blanketed with a thick grating of mozzarella.

Pasta Genova makes lasagna in individual sizes, double, quadruple and larger ones for a crowd. Catering packages (they create, you bake) can include focaccia bread and caesar salad.

Pasta Genova, 234 Wellington St., Kingston; 613-542-6414

Windmills Café

At Windmills, the ingredients in a tray of lasagna can shift from day to day — and this is as it should be in a restaurant that stresses taking advantage of the best of each season. According to chef Hicham "Sam" Eddahi, "The lasagna will depend on the moment — what is fresh and available now and how people are feeling. I can tell when people's attitudes change. For example, (this time of year) customers need warmth and are looking for heartier vegetables, and the food has to reflect that feeling."

The base of the vegetarian lasagna is constant — layers of sheet noodles topped with slices of vegetables and ricotta cheese. It's the exact combination of veggies that reflects the seasonal shift. "I look for fresh products," Eddahi points out. When possible, he uses local ingredients and depends on local growers.

So, here's how a Windmills lasagna grows: start with an empty baking dish and alternate layers of lasagna pasta noodles with thick slices of vegetables (butternut squash and zucchini are restaurant favourites), baked portobello mushrooms (the pre-cooking draws out the water from the mushrooms) and spinach. Spread some ricotta on top of each vegetable layer (when Eddahi started at Windmills just over a year ago, he tweaked the lasagna recipe, replacing the rich cream cheese with a lighter ricotta). "The ricotta doesn't add a lot of overwhelming flavour because we wanted to accentuate the flavour of the vegetables."

After three or four alternating layers, the tray is slipped into a low-temperature oven. Once the vegetables are baked, the flavours start to meld and blend. By the time it gets to your table, it has been cut into squares and served in a pasta bowl atop a yin-and-yang-style swirl of homemade tomato sauce and the restaurant's basil pesto cream sauce.

Salad on the side would be great. You might want to hold the bread, though, as this is a filling dish on its own. Bring on a glass of Rosemount Shiraz Cabernet.

Windmills Café, 184 Princess St., Kingston; 613-544-3948

Frankie Pestos Italian Eatery

It may be a bit of a stretch to say that the Lasagna Di Casa at Frankie Pestos is different each time, but it wouldn't be a lie to say that the recipe changes from day to day, depending on what's in season, what ingredients are in the kitchen . . . and what kind of a day the chef is having. But when you are a restaurant that is family owned and operated by second-generation Italian-Canadians, you are allowed a certain amount of latitude in how you create your dishes. What's fresh? What's your mood that day? Why not?

"It's a chef's creation," explains Robert Cordeiro, head chef at the downtown eatery. "It depends on the mood, how busy we are. It changes. Sometimes we make vegetarian lasagna dishes that depend very much on what is in season. Our most popular lasagna has baby meatballs of pork and beef, tomato sauce, ricotta cheese, mozzarella cheese and Parmesan. That's our staple lasagna — Lasagna Polpettine."

One piece of advice: When you sit down to order at Frankie Pestos, ask your server to describe the lasagna of the day. In addition to the meatball lasagna, there is a three-mushroom version (portobello, porcini and the regular white — or button — mushrooms found in every grocery store) that makes a regular appearance on the menu. Another popular version steers away from tomatoes and towards cream-based sauce: a mixture of homemade alfredo sauce and mozzarella cheese, seasoned with basil and oregano.

"Sometimes we like to mix it up," Cordeiro says. "We make a meat lover's lasagna with sausage, pepperoni and chicken. And there's also one with chicken, creamy pesto sauce, sundried tomatoes and spinach." For all the recipes, the base sauces — tomato, meat and white — are made in house. Ditto for the salad dressing served on the accompanying caesar salad.

Servings are large. "You won't leave hungry," he promises.

Frankie Pestos Italian Eatery, 167 Ontario St., Kingston; 613-542-1071

East Side Mario's

Your Italian language lesson for the day is *al forno*. Translated, this means a dish that comes from the oven. And so that's where you'll find the Lasagna Al Forno from the list of baked pasta dishes at East Side Mario's: hot and from the oven.

Specializing in pastas and pizzas ("the main attractions"), East Side Mario's is a Kingston chain restaurant that serves up comfort food in a setting it describes as "an Italian restaurant based on family and friends." The restaurant has a bit of a market atmosphere — like a neighbourhood of Little Italy, with baskets of fresh vegetables on display, colourful flags and signs to recreate an outdoor patio feel. It's a space that's family friendly.

And when it comes to lasagna, the restaurant sticks to the tried and true, traditional Italian recipe. "We use our own Sicilian recipe: DeCecco lasagna noodles from Italy, meat sauce, and baked in the oven," general manager Trevor Stenning explains.

If you pulled up a stool in the kitchen and armed yourself with a pencil and paper, you'd be taking down the instructions for lasagna as it's made in the Old Country. Sheets of lasagna noodles are topped with meat sauce and a mixture of four cheeses (mozzarella, Parmesan, Gouda and white cheddar). The layers are repeated to fill the lasagna dish and then the casserole is topped with additional cheese and baked until golden brown. Like most dishes at East Side Mario's, the Lasagna Al Forno is served with a choice of salad or soup and unlimited home-baked bread.

You'll find the lasagna on the dinner menu only, but if you're in at lunch, just ask your server and there may be a tray fresh from the oven. *Al forno*. Just tell them that you want it *al forno*.

East Side Mario's, 774 Gardiners Rd., Kingston; 613-389-8114

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