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DINNER THEATER

A PEEK BEHIND THE SCENES AT
OLIO E LIMONE RISTORANTE AND OLIO PIZZERIA
REVEALS HOW THE STAGE IS SET FOR A FINE ITALIAN MEAL.

BY JOAN TAPPER PHOTOGRAPHS BY GARY MOSS



A dish of *pesce spada con caponata*—lightly breaded swordfish fillet with Sicilian ratatouille (opposite, far left)—epitomizes Olio e Limone’s deft contemporary play on classic Mediterranean cuisine. Before the food arrives at the table, however, hours of meticulous preparation have readied the restaurant for its patrons. Clockwise from left: The back-lit faux marble wall makes a stunningly dramatic entryway and back bar; Janet Garcia monitors the thickness of a sheet of pasta in a cozy space shared by the restaurant and the adjacent pizzeria; stuffed pastas, like these veal tortelloni, are all made on-site; server Dan Mansiere puts finishing touches on a table setting before dinner; only initials label the spirits that are barrel aged here, then decanted into bottles like these, ready for signature drinks like the Manhattan.

A WONDERFUL RESTAURANT EXPERIENCE, whether it takes place at a white-tablecloth establishment or a casual eatery, is a bit like theater, with most of us happily in the audience. Sometimes it’s fun, though, to venture backstage and see what goes into those memorable meals. Now that Santa Barbara’s Olio e Limone Ristorante and Olio Pizzeria have added locations in Westlake Village, *805 Living* had a chance to peer behind the curtain.

The new venues, located next door to each other, opened last July. “We had great faith in the location,” says Elaine Andersen Morello, who owns the restaurants with her husband, chef Alberto Morello, and grew up in nearby Oak Park. The key, however, was ensuring the quality and consistency for which their restaurants are known. As a visual reminder, they built the backlit bar at Olio e Limone out of faux marble, a nod to the décor of the Olio Crudo Bar they inaugurated in Santa Barbara in 2014. The menus have also remained the same—an array of pan-Italian dishes with Sicilian touches that evoke Alberto’s birthplace, along with frequent seasonal specials.

“We have plays on the classics,” says Elaine, “but we also pay attention to trends,” like a heightened awareness of regionalism, that shows up not only in cheeses and >





Proprietor Elaine Andersen Morello (left, wearing the scarf) meets with general manager Tracy Brister, Dan Mansiere, sommelier-server Tyler Berry, and bartender Jessica Lieberman before the meal service, heightening the excitement over special dishes and recommended wine pairings, and sharing information about any regulars who have reservations. As much work goes into front-of-the-house operations as takes place in the kitchen. Clockwise from below: Chef Alberto Morello confers with his sous chef Benjamin Garcia and lead cook Noe Tecu and samples one of the dishes on the evening's menu; in the pizzeria, the wood fire has been going since early morning, in anticipation of the moment when a pie is shuffled in; baked to perfection, a pair of pizzas are ready to be brought to the table.





A splash of alcohol (bottom, left) adds the drama of flambé to sautéed fresh-imported Dover sole. Microgreens add a colorful accent to a starter of burrata with beets and prosciutto (left). Presentation is part of every restaurant's repertoire, and staff members at both the restaurant and the pizzeria—some 180 in all—contribute to a memorable dining experience. Bartender Nick Pulley (above) is known for his mixology. His Martini all'Olio and Rosmarino Succhiello have become signature libations. At the pizzeria, *salumiere* Massimo (below, right) presides over the many varieties of charcuterie with characteristic aplomb.





Still life in gold and amber—a stylized arrangement of fresh lemons and twinkle lights in glass (left) pays homage to the evocative name of the Morellos' culinary enterprise; it also reminds diners of fruit that grows abundantly on the chef's native island. Above: Tyler Berry proffers a bottle of vino that will complement a meal. As wine buyer for the Westlake establishments, Berry ensures that more than 200 wines are available, about two-thirds of them Italian, the rest from California. The result is a wine cellar of note, located in the restaurant behind a gorgeous glass wall. Below: A glass of Broglio Gavi Spumante, from Italy's Piedmont region, provides the perfect introduction, or conclusion, to a fine Italian meal.

salumi at the pizzeria but also in the long list of Italian wines and artisanal beers at both restaurants. Diners can find favorite Olio e Limone items, like the Tagliata di Bue (beef tenderloin), Quaglie con Salsiccia (roasted quails stuffed with sausage), and whole branzino (seabass), though the availability of seafood choices at both restaurants depends on what's fresh and sustainable in the market. Pizzeria patrons can enjoy pizza standards and specials, such as a *guanciale* and fennel pollen-topped pie.

The Morellos rely on local, mostly organic produce purchased from micro-ranches, while the stuffed pasta and pastries are all made in-house in a space shared by the restaurant and the pizzeria. The cocktails get special treatment, too, with some spirits barrel aged on the premises.

The day begins early with the kitchen staffs cutting vegetables, making garnishes, simmering sauces, and firing up the pizzeria's wood oven. Often there are samples of the daily specials for the servers to taste before tables must be set and reset as patrons come and go. As the chef and cooks move into action, Elaine huddles with the front-of-the-house staff in the restaurant. "We want them excited about going onstage," she says. ♦





Flickering tea lights (bottom, left) help set a relaxed, romantic mood. The Morellos (left) take a moment to chat with restaurant patrons during dinner. Says Elaine, "When regulars are coming in, we want to make them feel special without, of course, making the other guests feel unimportant." For a culmination, choices of *dolce* at Olio e Limone include artisanal gelati (center, left), the cannoli (below), and a host of delectable creations made by the pastry chef.

