

FAMILY SECRET

LINGUINE'S

CUISINE: *Family Italian.*

ATMOSPHERE: *Casual and bustling.*

SIZE: *Seats 70.*

ENDURING FAVORITES:

Linguine with dandelions; linguine with fresh calamari; all homemade pasta, but especially cheese manicotti with meatballs; Pasta fa Julia; artichokes stuffed with breadcrumbs, lemon and garlic.

PRICE: *Appetizers from \$3; pastas from \$7.25; nightly features and chalkboard specials from \$9.*

LOCATION: *5380 Genesee St. at Harris Hill, Bowmansville.*

PHONE: *683-6542.*

HOURS: *11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday to Thursday; 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Friday; 3 to 10 p.m. Saturday.*

By LOIS BAKER

In a small plaza in the tiny hamlet of Bowmansville, in the shadow of a Citgo station, sits Linguine's, one of the best-kept secrets on the Western New York restaurant scene. Linguine's was five years old last September. Given the average (read short) life span of restaurants, there are all sorts of reasons why Linguine's shouldn't be successful, starting with its obscure location and gas station frontage.

Moreover, Linguine's is family-owned and operated, qualifying it for the restaurant endangered-species list. There is no big corporate money to keep it afloat in bad times.

Yet the place is crammed on a Saturday evening. Patrons picking up armloads of takeout sidestep diners crowding the foyer waiting for a table. This, despite spending nary a dime on advertising.

"We pride ourselves on being a word-

of-mouth business," says chef and co-owner Vinny Desiderio.

Desiderio and his wife, Linda, opened Linguine's in September 1998 in a storefront on the corner of Genesee Street and Harris Hill Road, a location that had seen several cafés come and go. But the Desiderios brought with them years of experience. Vinny earned his stripes at Desiderio's, his parents' restaurant, a mainstay in Cheektowaga for two decades before it was demolished to make way for the I-90 William Street on-off ramp. He and Linda met there; he was the cook, she was a server.

Linda moved on to Salvatore's Italian Gardens, where she spent 20 years in the front of the house. Vinny eventually opened Impaxx, a now-defunct nightclub and dinner theater where he managed the kitchen for seven years. They married and added two daughters to their family in the interim: Danielle, 15, now a sophomore at

Lancaster High School, and Julia, 11, a fifth grader. (Patrons meet the girls through signature dishes on the menu: Linguine Danielle, with mushrooms, olives, tomatoes and asiago cheese; and Linguine Julia, with shrimp, artichokes and tomatoes).

When Vinny and Linda decided to combine their years of restaurant experience and open their own place, Linda didn't quit her day job. Not ready to risk it all, she took a leave of absence from Salvatore's in case things didn't work out.

"We wanted to work together," says Vinny, "and we wanted a restaurant we could manage by ourselves." Vinny concedes going on their own was "a little scary." Linda admits she was terrified.

The senior Desiderios helped out in the kitchen in the early days. The first week there were 10 customers.

"We crawled before we walked," says Vinny.

By the following spring, they began to feel confident. After a year working 12-to-14 hour days, seven days a week, they decided they would try closing Sundays so they could have some family time. Business continued unabated. Now they close on all the big holidays.

The key to their success? "Use fresh ingredients and you're going to get a quality product," says Vinny. "End of story."

Vinny says Linguine's menu is based on entrées he learned to cook over the years. Many dishes feature fresh dandelions, for which the restaurant is noted, and garlic is used with abandon.

"We're famous for garlic," Vinny accedes. The "Pasta fa Julia," otherwise known as "pasta fazool" – the traditional thick soup of beans, pasta and vegetables – is delicious beyond compare. Tripe, another Italian staple now found infrequently on local menus, is featured here every Tuesday night. Each evening has its "feature" in addition to the dishes on the printed menu and the multitudinous chalkboard specials.

Monday is spaghetti with sausage, meatball and mushroom; Wednesday is ravioli. Thursday is gnocchi with "lite" cream and sausage, and Saturday features veal puttanesca (with garlic, olives, mushrooms, capers and anchovies). Friday is reserved for "Linguine Vincent," pasta sauced with garlic, olive oil, mushrooms and anchovies.

Linda hasn't been overlooked. "Linguine Linda," prepared with hot peppers, mushrooms, artichoke hearts and fresh goat cheese, can be ordered up from the chalkboard.

The Desiderios dry their own peppers, which dangle on strings from the ceiling.

They make their own sausage, meatballs, manicotti and gnocchi, and it goes without saying, their own sauce. Patrons carry sauce home by the quart. Linda makes the desserts: cannoli (featuring homemade shells), banana cream pie, chocolate peanut butter pie and deep-fried cheesecake. Cousin Gloria works in the kitchen, and niece Lisa fills in as waitress and hostess. The senior Desiderios still help out during the day and still prepare their much-admired marinated eggplant.

The family and its recipes have held up well. Running a demanding business could destroy some marriages. But the Desiderios' arrangement works. "I stay in the back," says Vinny with a smile, "and she stays in the front."

Linguine's overflows with customers.

"We cater to everybody," says Vinny, "the average Joe, professionals, celebrities. We get a lot of Bills, a lot of hockey players. Some people said we'd never make it, being next to a gas station. We went from zero customers to thousands with no advertising. We've exploded."