



## Italian farmhouse in the city

It has become La Mesa's go-to restaurant for wood-fired pizzas, rustic pasta dishes and slow-cooked meats. Or if you drop in any day of the week for breakfast or lunch, between 8 a.m. and 3 p.m., you'll find the most outrageous bloody mary in San Diego County.

Farmer's Table is the brainchild of Sicilian-born restaurateurs Alberto Morreale and his cousin, Vincenzo LoVerso. It's a whimsical offshoot to Morreale's Farmer's Bottega Restaurant in San Diego.

Prior to opening early last year at the charming west end of La Mesa Village, the design team brought in a ton of reclaimed materials to the previously forsaken space, which for 40 years housed Sanfilippo's Pizza. They included metal rings from wine barrels that were crafted into chandeliers, old tools used as wall decorations, and a 1939 red tractor that serves as a focal point in the bar area.

Indeed, an inviting farmhouse elan was achieved, standing in modern contrast to the familiar red-and-white tablecloths and outdated décor that defined Sanfilippo's.

Visiting as a twosome on a Wednesday, we arrived to a full house at the peak of the dinner rush. We were seated toward the back, within the ambient light of the glass-enclosed kitchen that shows off a wood-fired oven imported from Naples. It is from this portly-shaped appliance that Neapolitan-style pizzas and flatbreads emerge after cooking in a jiff at very high heat.



Grilled artichokes (*Photo by Frank Sabatini Jr.*)

We were in artichoke heaven with a starter of the thistle's meaty hearts flash-grilled and accented with garlic, white wine and fresh mint. They came with the same addicting oven-toasted ciabatta bread that accompanied a second appetizer of chopped mushrooms and olives served in a little glass jar — a novel combination of earthy-salty flavors tailor-made for grilled bread.



Mushroom-olive chutney in a jar (*Photo by Frank Sabatini Jr.*)

A bowl of mushroom soup my companion ordered proved excellent as he gave equal flavor points to its mushroom base and sweet cream undertones.

The menu offers plenty of preludes such as the wild boar sausage we also tried. The outsourced meat was speckled with cranberries and served over plain-tasting polenta as well as and caramelized peppers and onions hailing from Julian. Unlike fennel-spiked Italian sausage, this offered possible hints of nutmeg and marjoram. Whatever the exact spices, they pleasantly toned down the gaminess of the boar.

To our satisfaction, the tender pieces of short rib scattered across the pizza we chose was free of barbecue sauce, which in my opinion is an unholy ingredient on pizza. Here, the meat carried a natural, roasted flavor that paired swimmingly to plops of fresh mozzarella, caramelized onions and red bell peppers.



Short rib pizza (*Photo by Frank Sabatini Jr.*)

As best summed up by my companion, the pizza offered big, varied flavors in every bite.

I failed to take into account the dense cut of pasta used in “paccheri carbonara.” I love carbonara and only the second word in the title caught my eye. The dish is a rarity in restaurants because the velvety egg-yolk sauce can be tricky to make in busy kitchens.



Paccheri carbonara (*Photo by Frank Sabatini Jr.*)

Here, the sauce was fraught with a generous measure of cream. And the large-tube pasta added too much weight to a dish that is already heavy even when made traditionally with thin linguine or medium spaghetti. The only classic flavor that emerged originated from pieces of pancetta. The egg yolks and obligatory Pecorino cheese were lost in this translation.

Farmer's Table sources ingredients from a slew of local purveyors, all listed on the back of the menu. Most of the pasta, for example, comes from Assenti's in San Diego's Little Italy district. Artisan cheeses hail from Venissimo, also in San Diego, while eggs and produce come from farms in our county's northern regions.

Other starters and entrees include bison tartare, grilled octopus, chicken liver pate, ratatouille risotto, pappardelle pasta with oxtail, plus a host of tempting ingredient combinations for the pizzas and flatbreads.

The drink list covers all bases with craft beers on tap, signature cocktails and a strong wine list leaning toward Napa and Sonoma regions.

But nothing tops the \$36 “barn yard” bloody mary available during breakfast and lunch. Served in a pitcher, it features a whole roasted chicken, bacon-wrapped shrimp, skewered mozzarella, numerous veggies and a half-liter of vodka.

I’ve yet to behold the spectacle, although my companion experienced it with a small group in a previous visit and said it was fun and monstrous. The cocktail, along with smaller versions served in jars, is a rousing come-on to French toast, pancakes, frittatas, sandwiches and other early-day fare.

Our dinner ended with a tall slice of helium-light limoncello cake made in-house. It sported a robust degree of citrus. The creme brulee was also noteworthy, despite being a classic recipe versus the sold-out peanut butter version we were originally offered.



House-made limoncello cake (*Photo by Frank Sabatini Jr.*)

Maybe next time, which there will be when I’m strolling the village with a hankering for modern Italian food served with whimsical touches in a convivial atmosphere.