

IN THE KITCHEN

BY E.C. GLADSTONE PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEFF GREEN

PIPS CUCINA & WINE BAR: *Vegas' Dolce Vita*



Pips Cucina & Wine Bar offers a smart backdrop for owner Rino Armeni's family recipes.

It was a simple idea. Rino Armeni just wanted to have an unfussy place where he could cook some of his mother's recipes from Rome and maybe serve guests a nice glass of wine. Somehow, though, the vision of the Caesars Palace and Southern Wine & Spirits veteran became Pips Cucina & Wine Bar, the new restaurant/lounge at Aliante Station that is not only a standout in northwest Las Vegas but is quickly becoming a culinary destination across the Valley.

"The first time we did a tasting, people told me I was crazy," says Armeni, with an accent that years in Vegas haven't dulled. "They said, 'Why are you doing that? You're in Aliante.' I said it doesn't matter. The one thing I've learned in my life is this: When you give quality to people, people will come back."

Quality is something that extends to all parts of the Pips experience. Armeni

walks around the elegant, modern dining room in a casual sweater, like a film director in his Beverly Hills mansion, full of laid-back charm, wit and character-filled stories. "I think this is the best-looking Italian restaurant in Las Vegas," he says with a mixture of pride and humility that is hard to resist. But the smart design (by Hatch Design Group) seems only fitting for a restaurant whose secret agenda may be to bring the Rome of Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* into a new millennium.

"I want to educate people what true Italian food is," Armeni says. "Italian food has been bastardized over the years, because people couldn't find the right ingredients, or they were too lazy to find the right ingredients. We use the right ingredients."

For example, "Oregano is essential in Italian cooking," says the restaurateur, stating the obvious. But he insists the best oregano comes only from Sicily or Brindisi,



Executive chef
Gerald Chin.



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and every August he goes to the latter in person. "I buy every piece of oregano I can. I put it in shoe boxes and I ship them!" Cheeses also come from all over Armeni's homeland. "Not every pasta goes with Parmigiano. Certain pasta goes with Pecorino Romano; certain pasta goes with ricotta from Puglia; certain pasta goes with Pecorino from Sardinia."

As for those noodles, the kitchen uses three different doughs: semolina, a durum-semolina combo and an all-purpose soft dough. "We make our own tomato sauce," he adds, "exactly the way my mother makes it."

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Originally, chef Gerald Chin confirms, the concept was "hard-core traditional Italian. Of course I'm not Italian, so we have to do a little twist on things." Whereas starters like arancini rice balls are fairly traditional, Chin has introduced creative additions like a truly international tuna crudo—sashimi served with Italian eggplant caviar and basil essence on a toasted tortilla—a "tricolore" Campari tomato filled with Burrata cheese and sprinkled with basil "confetti"; and San Danielle prosciutto wrapped around crostini. "It's more of a meaty flavor than Parma," Chin explains of his preference for San Danielle.

No one would have a hard time identifying the scampi or osso buco, and the bucatini matriciana gets authenticity points for using real Italian guanciale, a type of unsmoked bacon made from the pig's jowl. The gnocchi are all-durum, not potato. "These have more tooth to them, which I think helps with that hearty blue-cheese flavor," the chef says. Chin's ravioli are filled with deboned, shredded short ribs and sweet mascarpone cheese, while the tria pasta mixes fresh and fried hand-cut pieces for a unique textural experience.

Other dishes might seem like Americanized versions but actually aren't. Of the polpette meatball sliders, Armeni insists, "My mother makes these when I go home to Rome." The fondue, made with 24-months-aged Parmigiano-Reggiano, Armeni also copied, from a Roman enoteca.

"To be honest, I was lucky to find Gerald," the restaurateur says.

Chin's pedigree is certainly impressive. Prior to joining Pips, he was the first executive chef placed by Joël Robuchon at MGM Grand's The Mansion, where visiting high rollers are virtually encouraged to challenge the kitchen to make anything their hearts desire, at any time of day or night. Before that, he helped open the three-Michelin-star Joël Robuchon at the MGM.

