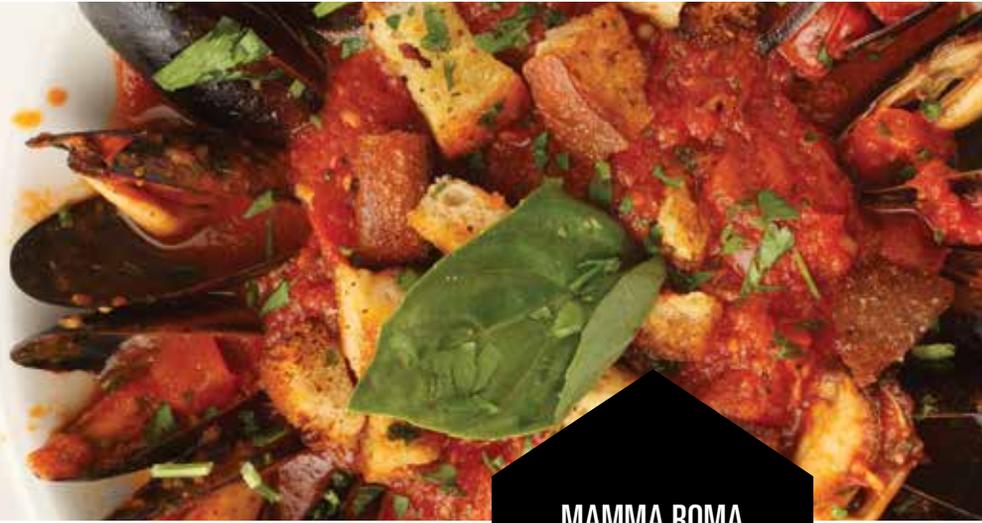


The REAL DEAL



MAMMA ROMA
8743 Piney Orchard
Parkway, Odenton
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mammaromas.com

By Rita Calvert | Photography by Tony Lewis, Jr.

What a gem—quite authentic Italian, complete with Mamma herself, whose twinkling eye and wit will charm you before you even decide what to order. Certainly not a buttoned up kind of place, this is a family-style Italian restaurant, which just celebrated its 10-year anniversary in the Odenton location. The family’s second spot is in Brandywine, Maryland (open five years) and run by sons, Bruno and Rino. Interestingly, staff rotates between the two locations, both offering the same menu. This longevity in two locations is hard to achieve unless you provide good service and quality food at a fair price—and Mamma’s gets this right. It’s clear from the moment you walk in that this place has many fans and regulars, as Mamma welcomed numerous diners like family. And they called her Mamma without minding at all when there was a line out the door.



Mamma herself greeted us from behind the counter as we entered, handing us menus and explaining that we could choose our seat while we considered the menu. Then we were to order and pay at the counter. A waiter would serve the food. Quite a different approach that is helpful to know before going.

We seated ourselves in the bustling but quiet dining room at a four-top table, as the booths were taken. The neutral tones of brown wood and monochromatic

flooring added to the calm vibes, while painted murals along one long wall portrayed vistas of Italy.

The wait person offered drinks and delivered a loaded bread basket with an interesting twist. The “crispy around the edges” garlic bread was buttery with a big crunch from being baked or broiled. The wine list was decent with offerings from the most popular spots around the globe. Wine can be ordered in either six- or nine-ounce pours. A “flight” of wines is offered for \$9.99.

All the classic dishes are here, so if you’re a fan, you’re likely to have a lot of trouble deciding what to order. And I do mean *all* the classics—the menu is jam-packed, so you may need your readers to peruse the small print it took to fit everything in.

We started off with the Mussels Marinara along with a New York Style Gourmet White Pizza. Both were very different options so we could sample classics—and both were nicely done. Plump and plentiful mussels filled a large flat bowl with a nest of crisp fresh croutons to dip in

the surrounding tomato sauce, which was on the light side—to complement rather than compete with what it dressed. Pizzas here are either New York-style, sporting a thin round dough base or a thick crust, square-style Sicilian. And the medium (six slices) pizza was ample with just the right array of fresh veggies—verdant broccoli, red bell pepper, black olives, and mushrooms. Good quality ricotta and mozzarella cheese were flavorful and satisfying.

These were followed by our dinner salads, heavy on the iceberg just like you might expect at an old time place—but with pleasing additions, including some darker greens and house-made dressings. The house vinaigrette we ordered gave a definite pucker, being weighty on the balsamic vinegar. Salads come with every entree, which is a rarity these days.

Our entrees came out fast and furiously, perhaps a little too fast as we'd not finished our appetizers when our entrees appeared, but they were happy to whisk them back to the kitchen to keep warm until we were ready.

My dining companion believes that the true measure of quality in Italian eateries is the Eggplant Parmigiana so that was her choice. We'd heard the portions were large

here. Mama Mia, they weren't kidding! It was as though the entree was meant for three! The fried eggplant was crisply delicious—just how do they retain the crunch under all that fresh tasting tomato sauce? It rested royally atop a mountain of spaghetti and was more-than-generously blanketed with delicious mozzarella.

Wanting a nice portion of protein in my meal, I chose Pollo Zingara, which also offered plentiful veggies. Two very large chicken breasts topped a mound of linguine studded with roasted red peppers, black olives, capers, and artichoke hearts. The accompanying lemon sauce was abundant and pooled around the base of the concoction giving a big kick of tang *and* a spicy bite.

By this time, we were nearing 8 p.m. and the pizza crowd began to form a line out

the door. Although there were families with children in the dining room and the “to-go” crowd queuing up, the dining room's noise level was still civilized. Phew!

Desserts bear the all-too-rare “house-made” description, so it was tough to choose between tiramisu and cannoli, but we just had to after the deliciously filling meal. Tiramisu, Italy's most popular dessert, did not disappoint. A large portion was enough to share with distinctive texture contrasts between silky layers of rum, espresso-soaked cake (or ladyfingers), and a tall layer of mascarpone custard. The large slice was appropriately dusted with unsweetened cocoa on the top. We hadn't thought to order coffee in advance but servers were more than happy to bring us coffee and a separate check, updating us while we waited to note that they were brewing a fresh pot.



Limoncello, the lemon liqueur from the abundant lemon groves in Southern Italy, is rare in these parts, let alone homemade like it is at Mamma's. My friend capped the meal with Mamma's own, which was creamy in a novel small glass. Just as the real deal should be!

As a food writer, blogger, food stylist, Rita Calvert has partnered in writing cookbooks and developed product lines to showcase the inspiration, art and nourishment of food. In the Chesapeake Region, she is a strong advocate of local, sustainable farms.

