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“Luciano's offers real Italian flavor in Rahway” - Millicent K. Brody

Open only a few months, Luciano's Italian Ristorante & Lounge in Rahway is the topic of a favorable buzz.

It's a place where one may expect to hear the voice of Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin. Owned by builder Henry Kozalka and real-estate businessman Michael Merlis, both gentlemen have roots in Central Jersey. "We wanted to build a restaurant and fill it with people looking for great food and atmosphere," said Kozalka, who owns two major hotels in Poland.

Visitors to Luciano's can easily imagine dining in an old-world atmosphere. Modeled after a Tuscan villa, with a huge bar, two working fireplaces, fauxed walls in warm-glazed ochre, huge breakfronts, and upholstered seating, two spacious dining rooms may easily be converted to accommodate a corporate affair or family celebration.

"We began by studying the design and decor of Provence and Tuscany," said JoAnn Lynch who owns Decorative Arts and Sage Brush Studios in Rahway. Together with her daughters Kate and Jessica, the team replicated the colors of the region.

"Whether you are planning a family party or corporate affair or even a corporate breakfast, give me a call, and I'll assist with all the details," said General Manager Scott Davis. "Of course, it's always about the food, but a vital part of dining out, is the service. People really enjoy our attention to detail."

"I am exceedingly proud of this restaurant and all that has been accomplished," said Mayor James Kennedy. We invite Central Jersey residents to visit the all-new Rahway, and experience all that we have to offer."

"Come hungry," said executive chef and partner Joseph Mastrella formerly of Hilton Short Hills, Arthur's Landing and Spirito Grill in Weehawken. Assisting is sous chef Johnny Arango.

"I wanted to build a restaurant where people would come and enjoy the food and the atmosphere," Mastrella said. "I credit my family for my culinary achievements. As a family, we spent a great deal of time in the kitchen. My parents were from Sicily. In addition to fig trees and grapes, my father grows his own seasonal vegetables and fruits. When in season, they are served at the restaurant."

Lovers of real Italian food will enjoy the array of homespun specialties. Appetizer favorites include: jumbo lump crab cake topped with plum tomatoes and basil bruschetta; tenderloin of beef carpaccio with shaved slices of beef, parmesan cheese, and arugula salad, and zucchini fritto sprinkled with parmesan cheese, and served with a zesty marinara sauce. Topping the list of featured entrees are: Maine lobster pappardelle with sauteed, roasted tomatoes and asparagus in a tarragon cognac sauce; whole wheat penne and tonno (tuna), with fresh zucchini, cherry tomatoes, and squash blossoms; Sicilian braised short ribs over crispy gnocchi, with exotic mushrooms, and spring peas, finished with Madeira reduction; and pan seared strawberry sea bass with fava-bean-plum tomato ragu, and saffron cream broth. Dessert highlights feature chef Antonia Mastrella's own frozen lemon parfait, traditional vanilla bean creme brulee paired with a trio of dipping sauce and a warm apple tart. IF YOU GO Lunch: Monday to Friday, 11:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Sunday brunch, noon to 3 p.m. Dinner: Monday to Thursday, 5 to 10 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 5 to 11 p.m.; Sunday, noon to 9 p.m. Reservations recommended on weekends.