

By Josh Garrick //

La Bella Luna

There are two things that you need to know about La Bella Luna on New Broad Street in downtown Baldwin Park.

One is that while it may have the best pizza in Greater Orlando (and that's only because that's the area I can vouch for), it is also a very good full-service restaurant with a "something for everyone" menu. When I first walked into La Bella Luna – with its line of busy chefs working in the kitchen directly behind the front counter – I thought I was there to write a review of one of Central Florida's most respected pizza restaurants. Then we sat down and looked at the menu and realized I had to re-think my game plan. Not only does this restaurant offer two dozen specialty pizzas, it also offers a full menu of steaks, seafood, chicken *and* 16 pasta dishes. *And* it does a big catering business as well.

With this kind of bounty from which to choose, your intrepid "Foodie" – and two buddies – set to work on a tasting adventure that gave due respect to all parts of this wonderful menu. We started with four of the specialty pizzas, which come in your choice of 10 or 16 inches. I remember thinking to myself over and over again – "These pizzas have truly earned the title of 'specialty pizzas.'" Pizza

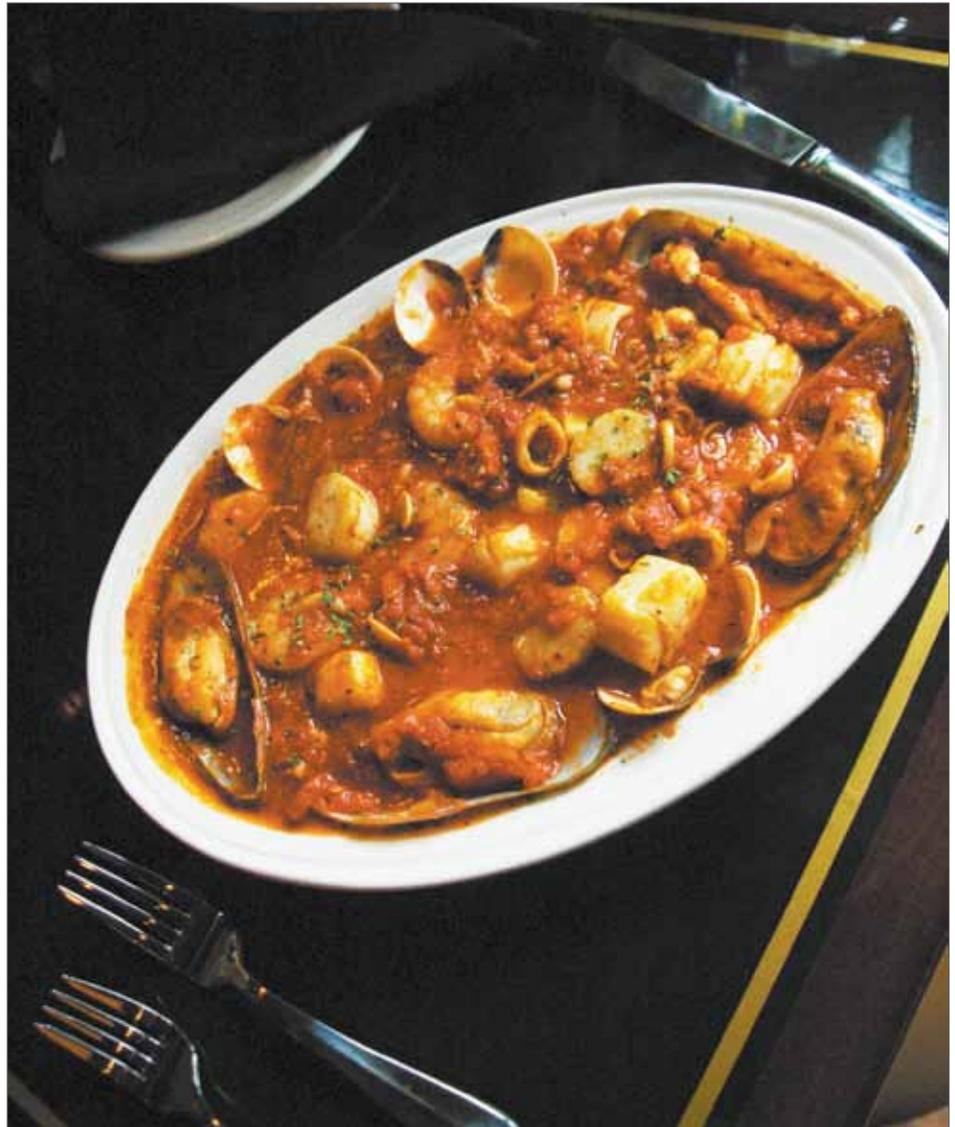


Photo by Isaac Babcock | Zuppa di Pesce, featuring shrimp, scallops, calamari, mussels and clams over marinara and linguini.

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INFO: La Bella Luna is at 4886 New Broad St. in Baldwin Park offering dine-in and outdoor seating, take-out or free delivery (within three miles). It's open Monday to Friday from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m.; Saturday from noon to 10 p.m. and Sunday from noon to 9 p.m. Call 407-895-0025.



La Bella Luna General Manager Jeremy Zobel shows one of the restaurant's more than 20 specialty pizzas.

From the Corner Table

Angelina is a melted mozzarella and roasted vegetable vision of Italy's finest. The Pizza Chicken Spinach is a 'meal' of chunk chicken grilled in olive oil and served over a bed of mozzarella melted over a thick (and nutritious) serving of spinach (no sauce). I dare anyone *not* to love the four cheeses in the traditional Quattro Formaggi including mozzarella, gorgonzola, Romano and Parmesan melted together with basil and sauce, while the Pizza Club (piled highest of all) is another full meal of chicken, bacon, fresh tomatoes (no sauce) and mozzarella. Hard to say which was my favorite – especially since four pizzas only put a dent in the menu choices, but I *will* (for sure) be back for the Pizza Club sometime soon.

Moving on to the pastas, we tried the Penne alla Vodka, the Pasta Luca and the Grilled Chicken Tortellini Carbonara. My favorite here is the Pasta Luca with its oh-so-good and so-good-for-you sauce of olive oil and garlic served with grilled

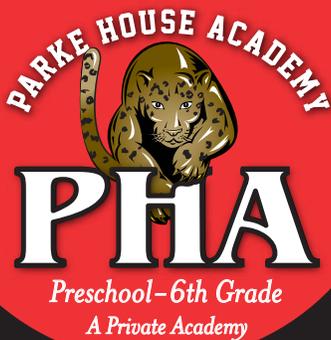
sausage, onions and peppers. Coming in a close second is the Chicken and Cheese-Filled Tortellini in a wondrous cream sauce flavored with ham and shallots.

It's worth noting that when I do a pasta evening, I like to enjoy those carbs with a hearty red wine. I was more than pleasantly surprised when my waiter suggested the "house Malbec." Really? Now I put it to you that having a "house Malbec" says a lot about *any* restaurant – especially as this one is absolutely enjoyable and a great complement to all those pizzas and pastas. Highly recommended.

Rounding out the variety side of the menu, I tried the Basa Diavolo, a mildly blackened flaky white fish served with roasted potatoes and broccoli. It was perfect. I'm pleased to report that this is a restaurant where the chef understands that when you request something blackened, you still want to taste your entrée *along with* the seasoning.

But if you remember, I began by saying that there are *two* things you need to know about La Bella Luna. The second is that this must be a great place to work, because the wait-staff is among the happiest (and most stable) group of waiters in town and that definitely adds to the enjoyment of being there. Much of the credit goes to Manager Jeremy Zobel, who has managed the restaurant for an unprecedented seven years. That is backed up by owner Raj Mitchell, who explains this good feeling with an exuberant, "I love my staff and I treat them like family. It's the way to present a good product ... with good service." Congratulations Ms. Mitchell. La Bella Luna succeeds on both counts.

And if you've read this far, during the month of September, when you tell them, "Josh sent me," the restaurant will be pleased to offer you a free dessert with the purchase of two entrées. Now we haven't even talked about the desserts, but (wink), go with the Tiramisu. *



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