

[dining]



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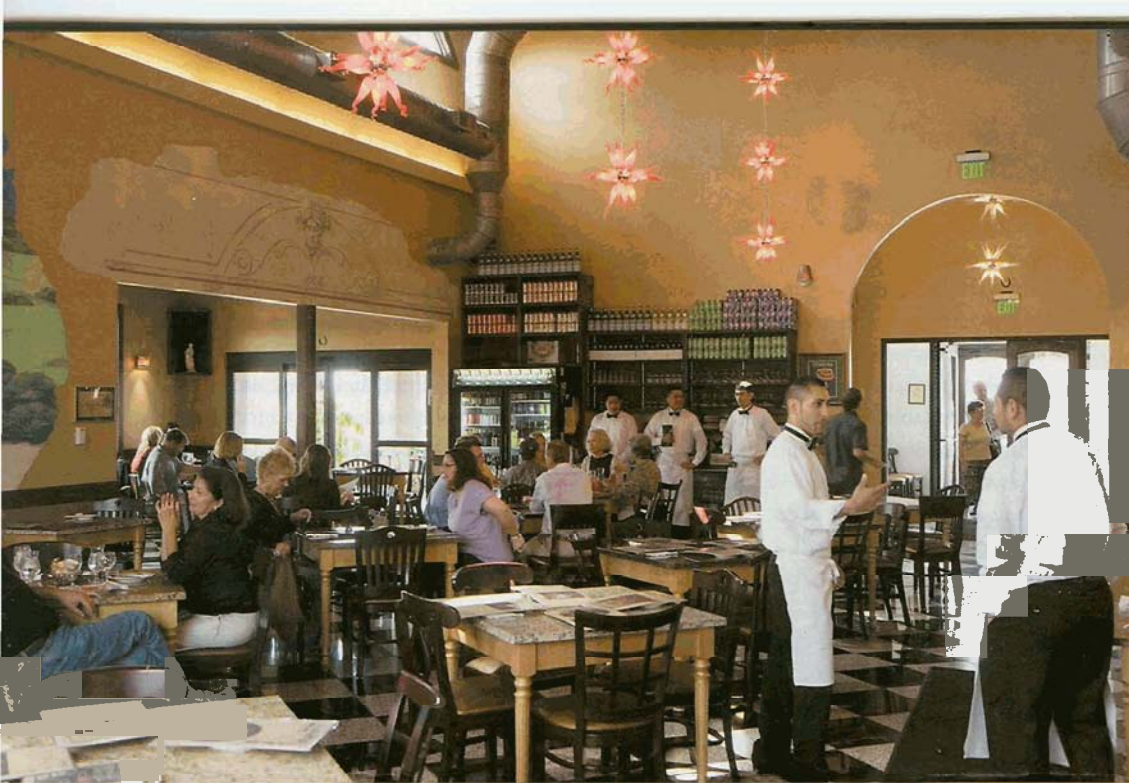
Café Borgia

10018 Calumet Ave., Munster
(219) 922-8889

Credit Cards Major credit cards accepted

Hours 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. daily

Reservations Not accepted



Border Crossing

LONGTIME FAVORITE ITALIAN BISTRO
MIGRATES TO NEW LOCATION IN MUNSTER

By Erin Guerra

Photos by Michael Roberts

For loyal customers of Café Borgia, months of anticipation are finally over. Now it's time to eat. The Italian restaurant has moved its well-rounded Italian menu, eclectic décor and Zagat's-recommended wine list from Lansing, Ill., to Munster. The experience begins as soon as diners drive up Calumet Avenue to the unique building, with murals on the exterior and an airy side porch for private parties.

Owners Mike and Karen Jesso, who double as chef and hostess, opened their business on Thanksgiving in 1986. Several members of their "staff-family," as they call them, have been with them for more than a decade.

We were greeted cheerfully as soon as we walked into the bright entranceway, where those waiting for tables are teased by the smell and sight of long loaves of



The new Café Borgia dining room (top) is larger and more airy than its famously tiny predecessor. Mussels (right) with marinara sauce



about while finishing off his appetizer. The simple romaine lettuce, tomato, onion and mushrooms were fresh and touched with the right amount of balsamic vinegar and olive oil. The most notable of the six salad offerings was a spinach Caesar, pear and gorgonzola on mixed greens, and a calamari salad with a lemon dressing. There's also a soup of the day and minestrone.

The house specialty entrees included grilled vegetables with balsamic-honey glaze, prosciutto and mozzarella-stuffed eggplant, smoked chicken risotto and Tuscan-style duck ragout. I've also heard good things about the well-thought-out thin-crust pizzas (pepperoni is not on the menu, but the four-cheese or Americano sausage would suit tentative appetites). Didn't I tell you this place has variety?

I narrowed in on the pastas, and there's enough choices here to have a different one every day for nearly two weeks.

My spinach pasta cannelloni was luxurious, with soft, bright green noodles and even softer ground veal, flecked with herbs. And the flavor and texture were both nearly as good when we reheated the leftovers at home.

The stuffed chicken breast, meanwhile, is best enjoyed at the restaurant where its browned top has the savory crispness of fried chicken. The fist-sized portion of moist meat surrounds four cheeses. It was served with freshly cooked green beans on one side. Silly me, I needed the server's help to identify the mound of slightly nutty grain on the other side. The delicately flavored barley was soft without being mushy, and overall it was a delightful surprise. I kept reaching across the table to steal fluffy bites.

The other main dishes feature lamb shank and chops, pork and beef tenderloins, cod, sea bass, tilapia and a T-bone steak.

Finish off the filling meal with a specialty coffee with or without a caffeine kick, and/or a cordial. And, of course, dessert.

Café Borgia brags about its tiramisu, and it also has Italian cannoli, sorbet, gelato and other expected sweets. More interesting may be the fig and macadamia nut cheesecake,

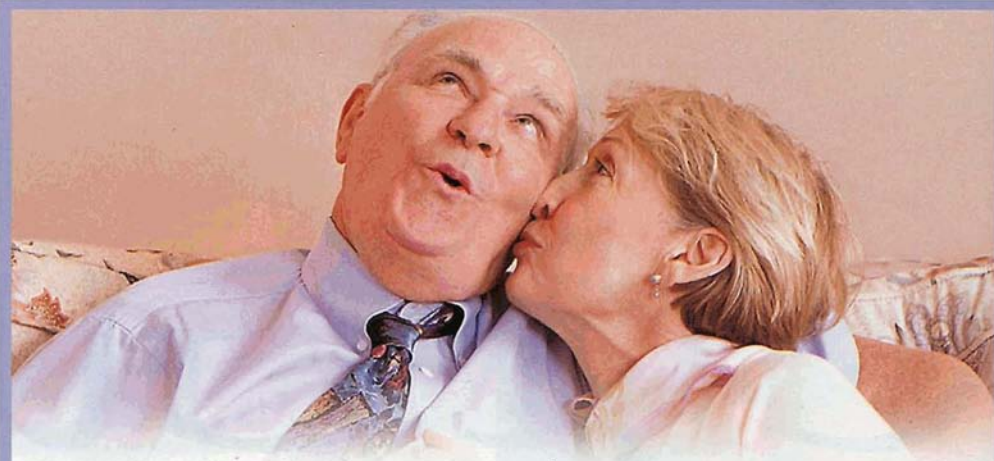
mascarpone-stuffed strawberries and warm pear tart.

I considered ordering their zucchini, which is a dome of chocolate cake filled with white chocolate mousse and pistachios, served with chocolate and raspberry sauces. Just thinking about the flavors now makes me want to go back to try it, and most likely gulp it down.

But I was too full to eat a dessert by myself

and Jeff isn't a fan of white chocolate, so we shared the chocolate pinwheel cake. The flourless soufflé cake was wrapped around ganache and served in two slices. It was a nice ender and not overly sweet.

Surprisingly, Café Borgia is not protective of its secrets. It offers a number of its recipes, especially desserts, for free on its Web site, www.cafeborgia.com. ■



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