

*Chicagoland's* ITALIAN AMERICAN VOICE<sup>®</sup>

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# REVIEW Comfort-food haven

by Charles P. Pecoraro

Over the past several years, the building on the southwest corner of Oakton and River in Des Plaines has been occupied by Italian and Chinese restaurants that came and went with the regularity of traffic at the busy intersection.

But with the arrival in January of Cuzzin's, things may have settled down for a while. "We're here to stay," vow owners-hosts Carl and Paula Dote.

And judging from the lunch and dinner action since the opening, that's more of a guarantee than an idle boast. It's as if folks with a pent-up appetite for Italian comfort food — the restaurant's specialty — have been waiting for a place like this to show up.

Cooked authentically in abbondanza amounts by Paula, Italian comfort food boils down to neckbones, tripe, baccalà, fried romaine, eggplant lasagna and other down-home staples of tradition-oriented, primarily southern Italian kitchens.

Cuzzin's is the culinary cousin of the Dotes' flagship eatery, media darling Danny's in Melrose Park, which prompted a prominent dining critic to declare, "If I could, I would eat here four times a week." It also has been featured on the popular TV show "Check, Please."

Both locations share the same menu, daily specials and reasonable prices. Where else, for instance, can you savor homemade four-cheese lasagna with salad or soup for \$9.95? Or a glass of Fortissimo red wine for \$4? Nothing is higher than \$14.95.

Ambiance at Cuzzin's is as unassuming as the fare. About 100 are accommodated in a narrow

room with a wall of mirrors and congenial mood. A row of celebrity photos, stacks of tomato cans, small service bar, paper napkins and Sinatra-Bennett-Martin background tunes sustain the bare-bones theme. Noise levels are not conducive to intimate conversations.

Cooking reflects the mix of Sicilian, Calabrese and Neapolitan heritage in the Dotes'

## *Cuzzin's*

- **WHERE:** 1881 Oakton, Des Plaines.
- **HOURS:** Lunch, Monday to Friday; dinner nightly; closed Sunday, except for parties.
- **HOW MUCH:** Entrees, \$9.95-\$14.95; appetizers, salads, sides and sweets, \$1.95-\$8.95.
- **PARTIES:** Up to 100.
- **TIDBITS:** Carryout and catering. Parking lot. Reservations for five or more only.
- **CONTACT:** 847-795-0009

[www.cuzzinscafe.com](http://www.cuzzinscafe.com)

families. The no-nonsense menu gets right to the point with lotsa pasta, red sauce and dishes nonna may have made. If you have a taste for filetto di bue alla Lombarda, you're in the wrong restaurant. Earnest eats like Polk Street chicken (with fried lettuce and polenta) are what keeps Cuzzin's buzzin'.

For deep-rooted cravings, neckbones are the marquee attraction every Wednesday and

Saturday. This is roll-up-your-sleeves-and-dig-in chow, a platter piled with meaty pork bones drenched with thick, fragrant tomato sauce. Start picking and the meat falls off the bones easily, delivering lusty flavor with each forkful. When dem bones are picked clean, you can sop up the sauce with chunks of crusty bread.

Most baccalà recipes call for a tomato sauce that reinforces the salty nature of the cod. Here, however, Paula diminishes the briny tone with a light white wine mixture embellished with onion and olives that results in a boffo baccalà.

At the pinnacle of the pasta presentation is rigatoni with vodka sauce that sounds like, but has an edge over, those at pricier Italian establishments. The jumbo size noodles provide more surface to embrace a lighter, luscious pink sauce studded with sausage that complements, rather than overpowers, the tubular rigatoni.

An A-list of appetizers includes such palate stimulators as a standout stuffed artichoke, baked clams, polenta with crumbled sausage and fried smelt, served in and out of season.

Danny's — and now Cuzzin's — puts out a dynamite meatball sandwich that's more of a half-pound, hand-packed patty than a ball, grilled to a juicy goodness and tucked into rugged ciabatta.

Desserts are more mainstream than much of what precedes them. Closure comes in the form of decent tiramisù, cannoli, carrot cake and — surprise! — strawberries Romanoff. The wine offering is limited to just seven Italian labels, and BYOB is acceptable.

Nikki Forth heads a wait staff savvy in the ways and means of satisfying customers.