

LEARNIN' HOW TO MAMBO

BY SHANNON BAKER



There's no mistaking that aroma. Like the fragrance of a distant memory that if not revisited often, leaves you craving more, it's the first thing people notice when they walk in and the last thing that they'll remember when they leave. You've got to love that smell. Yes, it's the garlic.

Inside, activity bustles as wiry legs draped in checked pants scramble to make last minute preparations. Upstairs the regular row of servers is docked in their usual spots, slathering on lip-gloss and dabbing a touch of glitter for that extra sparkle.

"Hey," a sharp tongue sounds off from across the room. The heads of the others swivel in the direction of a voice they know too well. She's lasted the longest in this gig, and when she speaks people listen. If they don't, they'll be sure to hear about it later. Pleased with the reaction time, a sly grin smears across her face. "We're gonna be packed tonight so no mistakes." They nod in unamused unison.

In the background Frank croons "Chi-caaa-go" as the back door

bursts open. Sunlight pours in and the silhouette of a polished gentleman stands in the doorway. He swaggers across the floor.

"Hey ladies, how's it going? Listen up. Are we all ready, do we know where we're supposed to be? Let's keep everyone happy tonight and be on our toes. No mess-ups tonight," he says with a quick wink.

A sharp glance is cast in the direction of the youngest of the group, a small-town girl from eastern Montana in search of bigger places. Her face reddens and her childlike smirk rolls away.

This is the group that helps bring the crowds back. There's a just-as-sweet-as-she-is-smart Californian, who is in pursuit of her Masters in Education; a Southern belle with good old Southern values straight from the heart of Georgia; a savvy, smart Texan with witty charm; a wise-cracking jokester from the Hoosier state; and a rumored former CIA recruit from the Steel City. It's this supporting cast, combined with a great director, that sets the stage for every night's success.

The director speaks up, "Is it time? There's a line outside already."

Suddenly and with rhythmic grace an orchestrated chaos commences. Commands are bellowed from every corner and swiftly the players mambo into motion.

"Hit the lights!"

"Unlock the front door!"

"Can someone please crank the music!?"

It's 5 o'clock . . . ACTION!

The door swings open, horns blast and Frank belts out, "Start spreading the news . . ." as a feverish mob swarms in and blankets the downstairs, gradually seeping to the upper level. At 5:20 p.m. the house is already packed.

As if on cue, the phone rings and an unknowing voice on the other end of the line happily inquires, "Hi! Are you guys busy?"

Welcome to Mambo Italiano on a Saturday night.

Panning the room reveals all the pieces that create the mosaic known as "Mambo's," but you have to wonder how it came to be.

The answer lies in Chicago, on the corner of Clarke and Wrightwood, in a tiny pizza shop called Louigi's. It was at this particular spot, known to every Chicagoan, that Doug McNicoll realized something. "Every day I went there. They had either cheese for 75 cents or pepperoni for 85 cents," recalls Doug. "One day I desperately wanted a slice of pepperoni, but I only had 75 cents. I thought because I was a regular customer they would float me a dime, but they wouldn't. I settled for cheese, but I never forgot that."

And so it was that four years ago a software developer from Chicago took a leap of faith. He sold his company, bought a house over the Internet and set off driving across the country to a town he had vacationed in called Whitefish, Montana. Doug had decided to leave the city behind and try his hand in the pizza business.

He joined up with two partners who were also intrigued with the restaurant realm. Current partner and local culinary graduate Brad Townsend was one of them. "We wanted to do traditional Southern Italian," said Brad, "but we needed to add some flare."

The flare is a culmination . . . from traditional mama's kitchen classics like spaghetti and meatballs, bologneses and zuppas to original creations like Tootsie Rolls and salads with meatballs, this place brings classic Italy and big city style to small town Montana.

"What makes us special and what brings people back is our consistency, and we're consistent because we make our own stuff," commented Doug and Brad. "Every day at 11 a.m. the marinara is on the stove, left to simmer for five hours. We hand roll our three ounce meatballs, we hand crush our own tomatoes, we roll our own dough. We have genuine aged cheeses. Downstairs in the cooler is a 90-pound wheel of reggiano that is two years old. We don't mess around. We get the best because we want to be the best."

The menu is a collaborative mix of classical Italian immigrant style dishes and new, jazzed-up twists like Italian Nachos. This out-of-the-ordinary appetizer is a mountain of fried pasta topped with meatball and prosciutto sauce, mozzarella, banana peppers, black olives and tomatoes. But at Mambo's, the food isn't the only flare that's attracting customers. The ambiance alone provides an addictive adrenaline rush. The dining experience is a sensory overload, and it's a local favorite for that reason.

Located on West Second Street, Mambo's has survived four significant remodeling jobs. As it currently stands, patrons can enjoy a multitude of dining options, depending on what they're in the mood for. The upstairs provides a quiet, relaxed atmosphere. For those looking for an intimate evening, the Mambo's lounge comes complete



pasta. pizza. fun.



MAMBO ITALIANO
a great italian restaurant

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234 East 2nd Street
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Cash & Carry Catering available