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**Business**

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## More than pasta at renamed Pomodoro restaurant at Vintage Oaks

By Jennifer Gennari  
Submitted to the Advance

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From a culinary contest to a new pizza oven, Pasta Pomodoro is serving up change for the new year—including dropping “pasta” from its name to reflect the restaurant’s diverse offerings.

“Our name has evolved into Pomodoro to better reflect the wide variety of food on our menu,” says owner and chef Adriano Paganini. “Our pasta dishes are extremely popular, but we also serve soups, panini, risottos, salads, and main courses.”

And make that pizza, too. A pizza oven has already been added to the Vintage Oaks location. “We’ve had a lot of requests for pizza,” says general manager Francesco Storniolo, who has lived in Novato since 1992. “We think it will be very popular with families and young guests.”

On the menu are eight types of thin crust individual pizzas including Melanzane pizza with eggplant and Salsiccia pizza with homemade fennel sausage and Prosciutto di Parma pizza.

“I’m a pizza woman – it’s my thing,” said Oksana Collins, a junior at Novato High who was at Pomodoro for a birthday lunch with several girlfriends. “Getting pizza here is amazing.”

The movement to eat local and organic fare is transforming the menu, too. “A lot of folks here look for healthy options such as our organic salads, vegetarian dishes and whole wheat fusilli,” says restaurant manager Michele Benelli. “They also like the fact that several of our specialties are made with Fulton Valley free-range chicken or Niman Ranch beef.”

Organic mixed lettuces, spinach salad and farro salad are now being offered as well as handcrafted Fra’mani Gentile and Piccante salame served with ricotta and grilled piadina. Two risottos have been added: Risotto Salsiccia using Italian carnaroli rice, saffron and sausage, and a Risotto Speciale, prepared with seasonal ingredients. Off the menu are the

gluten-free options. “We decided that it just wouldn’t be right if we couldn’t deliver a 100 percent guaranteed gluten-free meal to a guest that is allergic,” said Benelli.

Benelli, a 1978 graduate of Novato High, says local favorites are the Gemelli (pasta with smoked and grilled chicken, sundried tomatoes, mushrooms and cream), Penne Portobello (Italian sausage, chicken, roasted mushrooms, arugula, roasted garlic cream sauce) and Chicken Marsala (grilled chicken breast with Portobello mushrooms and Marsala wine sauce).

Pomodoro, like many businesses in the Bay Area, is making strides toward being “green.” The restaurant is recycling more and kids’ beverages are now sold in biodegradable cups. “We hope that someday soon Novato can get a city-wide composting program going like the one in the City,” said Paganini. “It’s a great program and we’re proud to be part of it.”

The décor was updated recently, too. Look for murals with classic Italian icons, nostalgic photos and classic movie posters from Italy. Servers now wear casual attire—black and red T-shirts, jeans, and black aprons. “It’s a hip yet casual feel to match our friendly atmosphere,” said Paganini.

The wine list has been revamped with just Californian and Italian choices presented in order from lightest to fullest body. Like many osterias in Italy, Pomodoro serves most of their wines in three sizes of modern carafes called quartinos, with small tumblers for a more casual wine experience. “I simply went back to my roots,” Paganini says. “In Milan, wine is abundant and unpretentious and a part of every meal.” Also on the menu are higher-end wines, served by the bottle, which range from \$25 to \$80.

Paganini, who worked in some of the world’s top restaurants in Milan, Paris and London came to San Francisco in 1991 to work as the executive chef at the Donatello Hotel. Next, he opened Cafe Adriano, which received kudos from Gourmet magazine. Still, his vision for Pomodoro was to own a stylish restaurant that featured contemporary, high-quality, yet inexpensive Italian food. “In the past, when I cooked in big fancy kitchens, I was cooking for people who cared more about looking fancy than about eating well. Those people were no fun,” Paganini says. “Just so you know, it’s much better cooking for people who like to have fun while they eat.”

### Looking for Novato’s Best Italian Home Cook

A San Francisco resident and Italian native, Paganini recalls fondly the simple pleasures of his mother’s home-cooked meals. He hopes Northern Californians will amaze him with their beloved Italian dishes in his “Impress the Chef” culinary contest.

Participants are invited to write a story describing their favorite home-cooked Italian specialty dish and explaining why it is special. Entries must be received by Jan. 25, 2008. Stories can be dropped off at the Novato Pomodoro or submitted online at [www.pastapomodoro.com](http://www.pastapomodoro.com).

Five local winners from Novato and each of the Pomodoro restaurants in Northern California will take a sample of their dish to the semifinals—here in Novato Feb. 16 for North Bay participants. The entries will be judged on the basis of taste, presentation, originality and the story about the dish. Contestants do not have to disclose any closely guarded recipes and

must be willing to be videotaped and photographed during the regional semifinals and finals. The finals will be March 8, 2008.

The grand prize is a \$5,000 shopping spree at the winner's favorite store. The four regional finalists will each receive a Pomodoro dinner party and a shot at the grand prize, while local winners will receive Pomodoro gift certificates.

#### Pasta Pomodoro Restaurant

Where: 140 Vintage Way, Vintage Oaks Shopping Center

Hours: 11 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. Sundays through Thursdays and 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays

Phone: 899-1861

Web Site: [www.pastapomodoro.com](http://www.pastapomodoro.com)

Credit Cards: Visa, MasterCard, American Express

#### Impress the Chef Contest

Deadline: Jan. 25, 2008

Regional Semifinals: 1 to 4 p.m. Feb. 16, 2008

Where: 140 Vintage Way, Novato

More info: [www.pastapomodoro.com](http://www.pastapomodoro.com)