

**Title:**

Vessia Ristorante makes you feel at home

**Word Count:**

815

**Summary:**

The great atmosphere stems from the charming service and reliable, tasty food.

**Keywords:**

Dining, restaurants, Irvine, California, Orange County

**Article Body:**

The reasons we keep coming back to Vessia Ristorante in Irvine (in Orange County, Calif.) are pretty simple.

The food, the service, the room.

It's a special place, but not in that big, showy, ``special occasion'' way. Vessia is casual charm, warm hospitality and reliably tasty servings.

We've shared many meals here over the past five years. When my wife and I moved back to Orange County in 2000, we spent our first New Year's Eve with pasta and piped-in Italian music. Another night, we brought friends, and I devoured the serpentina alla Barese (\$22.50) -- thin, not- too-sweet sausage served with grilled polenta and spinach.

It seemed like the perfect place to celebrate my mother's 80th birthday, so we reserved the attached patio. A dozen of us lingered over pastas, fresh coffee and a hazelnut cake. As a joke, I planted a tiara on my mother's head. On the way out the door many hours later, our waiter, our busboy, manager Ismael Ayala and owner Franco Vessia formed a gauntlet of sorts, hugging her, kissing her hand, treating her like a queen.

We've come for more birthdays, for a get-out-of-the- house-the-day-after-Christmas dinner, and, as a special treat, I brought my mother in for lunch last month after a tough doctor's appointment.

It was my first lunch there, and it confirmed what I'd read in almost every mention of Vessia: It's a power-broker's palace by day. By profession and hobby, Mom and I are eavesdroppers, so it was a treat to be seated among name- droppers

going on about local and state politics.

Our spying ended when our lunches arrived. Mom had one of the specials, grigliata mista (\$23.95). Generous portions of shrimp and chunks of fish lolled in a light wine and butter sauce, surrounded by spinach and artichokes. My salmon (\$23.95) was grilled expertly with herbs and served with vegetables and potatoes. We could have opted for a less expensive lunch -- a wide array of sandwiches (\$9.95) and salads (\$9.25) and pastas (\$9.95) -- but it was a special meal, after all.

By nightfall, it's a family place.

The menu ranges from pizzas (from \$11.50) to more sophisticated fish and meat specials (in the mid-\$20s).

One recent night I met my wife and nearly 2-year-old son for dinner, but we were filled with a bit of trepidation.

Sure, Vessia is more casual than its white tablecloths would indicate. Still, a 2-year-old boy can test your definition of ``casual.''

Not to worry, our waiter told my wife while she waited for me to arrive. ``He'll be fine; he can be himself.''

 As he was, with few ill effects.

Our meal wasn't the best we've had here. My cuscinetto (\$19.95) -- skinless chicken breast rolled with prosciutto and asparagus stalks and topped with cheese -- was dry, as if it had been prepared as a lunch special and sat all day. My wife's fish special (\$23.95) was grilled salmon, and it was fine, though the lemon-caper sauce was too tart.

One miss won't stop us from coming back, and that's where the rest of the mix comes in.

You can feel owner Franco Vessia's hand -- sometimes, quite literally -- guiding you as you step in from the frenzy of a shopping-center parking lot. (The center is undergoing extensive renovations, and the road leading directly to the restaurant is temporarily closed.)

As you round the small lobby, traverse the snappy little bar and light into one of the earth-toned booths or tables, you look up to an open kitchen.

It's contemporary, casual, comforting. A light aroma of roasting garlic flows into the room.

``I've tried to establish a neighborhood restaurant, a place where people feel comfortable,'' Vessia said between the lunch and dinner rushes earlier this week.

``We tell our people to always recognize the regulars, and for people who aren't regulars, treat them like they are, so they become one.``

He has a few tricks he's picked up along a restaurateur route that began when he and his mother cooked at a small trattoria in a Chicago suburb. After it closed, he worked for Hyatt, which transferred him to Los Angeles in 1981. He did more time in corporate restaurants, at a Harry's Bar, since closed, in Century City, before eventually moving to Irvine to open Prego.

After a dozen years, he jumped to open his own house in a spot where previous restaurants had mixed luck over the years.

He and chef Gino Buonanoce worked with Vessia's mom to develop recipes to highlight Italy's regional cuisines.

He joined the Chamber of Commerce and made friends among the politicians and the administrators at City Hall. He opened his bar on Mondays to let locals be ``bartender for a night'' -- the little stories and photos on the Web site are a laugh.

He works the room.

``I know when people go out, they want to go to a place where they feel comfortable, like they're a part of something,'' he said.