

TABLE TALK

# BELLA VISTA'S SECRET INGREDIENT: *Love*

story and photos by  
**LEIGH CORT**

**T**he popularity of Italian food today strikes a balance between the old guard and the new.

Giovanni Prignano, chef and proprietor of Bella Vista Italian Restaurant in Fruit Cove and his wife, Alysha, are honored to be new in Northeast Florida. They have, within a few short months, brought their authentic Italian cuisine to the booming dining scene — an exciting new family-inspired Italian restaurant that welcomes neighborhood friends by reservation, occasionally having room for a group that drops by. They care at Bella Vista, making you feel as if you've been welcomed into their family home in Sicignano Degli Alburni, wondering when you might meet members of la Famiglia.

Calling ahead for reservations and speaking with someone directly is a unique moment in this era of online booking. At Bella Vista, you might hear Giovanni's or Paolo's lyrical accents welcoming you to a choice table when you're ready to relax and enjoy the dining experience.

"The Beautiful View" (Bella Vista's meaning) began for Giovanni and Alysha when they met as strangers in New Jersey, when he spoke very little English. When Alysha asked Giovanni how long he had been in the United States, his reply was: "I'm 22 years old." Their friendship and romance are a charming story — something you feel when you glance around Bella Vista at family photos, their mural of the Italian countryside and spot a video of the narrow streets of Salerno.



Alysha and Giovanni Prignano, owners of Bella Vista Italian Restaurant in Fruit Cove.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Alysha and Giovanni Prignano at a castle in Sicignano Degli Alburni, Italy.

Born into a family of farmers and helping the family from the time he was a little bambino, by 9 years old Giovanni declared, "I'm going to be a chef." Giovanni always had an affinity for food and coming to America.

His love of food started with the

care that his family infused into their own home. His teen years were spent studying cooking until he came to the metro New York region where he worked in restaurants while learning how to speak English and meet his love, Alysha. Though he knew very little English, today it's evident that he's fearless and determined. His passion for cooking is the biggest force in his life. Alysha knows that "Giovanni isn't afraid of anything. If Giovanni could move across continents, we could make a change and move to Florida; I wanted this for both of us."

The intentionality of Giovanni's cooking was one aspect of her new husband that Alysha really admired. Their like-mindedness blossomed, making them a dynamic duo to leave the Northeast seeking warmer weather, lots of sunshine and an opportunity for Giovanni to combine all his restaurant and private chef experiences into their own business. When the opportunity knocked at their door, they happily brought together family members and local talent to help them open Bella Vista, where chef's philosophy reigns.

"Mine is a scratch kitchen. Everything made to order. Let me treat you to our best, like my mother and grandmother, Filomena."

Italian food reveals an ancient openness about cooking; food is wonderful when it's cooked with love. Bella Vista brings Giovanni's passion to the table. And who can create an Italian meal better than, well, an Italian? So many dishes on the menu are remarkable: Involtini di Melanzane

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Flounder Francese

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(eggplant rollatini stuffed with ricotta), Polpette Della Nonna (homemade meatballs served with ricotta) and many of chef's favorites: pastas! You must mangia with joy by ordering Pappardelle Bolognese, Gnocchi al Gorgonzola, or the irresistible Cacio E Pepe (fettucine in a creamy sauce with black pepper tossed tableside in their

[ wine & dine ]

signature giant cheese wheel).

As if the lunch or dinner menu doesn't offer enough mouth-watering appetizers, seafood, pastas or meats (the Veal Milanese is utterly delectable as is the Chicken Marsala sauteed with mushrooms in a Marsala wine sauce), there are nightly specials that will tease you, too. Giovanni cooks with insatiable excitement and a spiritual reverence for each ingredient. He opened Bella Vista in a way that guests also feel his dedication to making his family proud with authentic origins like gathering olives on a beautiful late autumn day.

Alysha, Giovanni and the entire staff have so much to do to keep the restaurant flourishing. It opened in November and today sees a pulsating demand from fans who have recently found it.

The menu evolves daily depending on what is currently fresh and inspiring. Bella Vista has created the most incredible "family-style menu" that combines the culture of Italian dining with Old World hospitality. The best way to sample their menu is in parties



Bella Nice Pizza with Prosciutto, Burrata, Mozzarella

of four or more. And if you have seven or more in your party, the family-style menu is what you must enjoy. It's a culinary adventure, all named for regions of Italy like Sorrento, Positano and Amalfi.

A sampling of the Amalfi "feast" includes five appetizers, two pastas, two entrees and a grand assortment

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Calamari Fritti



Giovanni Prignano dishes out a pasta entre.

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of Italian desserts. Antipasto, caprese, New York-style pizza, eggplant rollatini, fried calamari to begin. Rigatoni Bolognese and Cacio e Pepe for your pasta course. Entrees might include Chicken Milanese or Chicken Parmigiana and Shrimp or Salmon Oreganata!

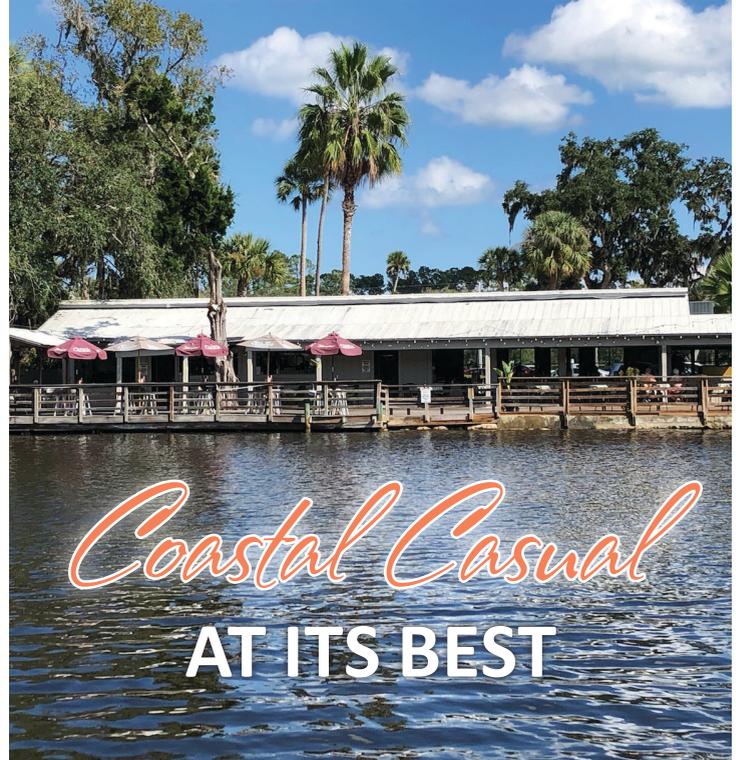
Then, imagine your celebration by adding unlimited house wine and beer to any family dinner (\$35, \$45 and \$55/pp) for only \$10/per person.

Ah, lunch in Italy — if you want to be transported for a lovely family dinner midday, Bella Vista serves lunch daily from 11 a.m. (closed on Mondays). All menu items are served throughout the day, but you might want to sample a Panini (sandwich) until 3:30 p.m. Chicken Sorrento (breaded fresh chicken, mozzarella and honey mustard), Eggplant Parmigiana sandwich with fresh basil or Meatball Parmigiana (homemade grandma-style meatballs, marinara, melted mozzarella, parmigiano cheese) are worth the visit.

I do occasionally dream of stumbling into a restaurant as if I had just landed in a small town in Italy, travel-weary and needing a bite to eat. That is exactly the overwhelming feeling and warm welcome that guests receive when they find Bella Vista. Food this good should be contemplated and consumed with a moment of silence. And if you need just a little extra piece of crusty bread to be dabbed into a dreamy pool of olive oil, herbs and garlic — don't be shy.

Alysha and Giovanni are still acting like newlyweds — but they don't need to pass their cell phones back-and-forth anymore to hunt for English and Italian translations as they did when they first met. Now they're busy making guests happy that they found this wonderful restaurant. And it's not necessary to know about the creation of every dish on chef's menu because it's mostly a language of love!

Learn more at [www.BellaVistaItalian.com](http://www.BellaVistaItalian.com).



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