

Moscato

Don't let the old building fool you. Although it looks like something out of *Bonanza*, the food inside is authentic Italian — the Camp Verde restaurant's namesake came from Sicily, via New Jersey.

KATHY MONTGOMERY

MOSCATO'S WEATHERED, board-and-batten facade looks like it was built for the set of a Western, but it's the real deal: The century-old structure previously housed a hotel and a saloon. And, incongruous as it may seem, the Italian restaurant now found inside is just as genuine.

Originally from Sicily, executive chef Salvatore Moscato learned the ins and outs of the restaurant business at New Jersey's famed Casa Dante — a favorite restaurant of New York Yankees short-stop Phil Rizzuto, and a place *The New York Times* described as “like a boisterous Italian embrace.” From there, Moscato built a career at Hilton resorts.

Sous chef Jenny Robbins owned a small California café and spent 10 years at the Four Seasons on the Big Island of

Hawaii before moving to Arizona. She met Moscato while they both worked at the Hilton in Sedona.

But the pair's biggest culinary influences came from their families, Robbins says. Both learned from grandmothers and mothers to appreciate fresh, made-from-scratch food. That was part of their motivation in opening Moscato: to get back to culinary basics.

But it was also the building. “It was a beautiful old building that needed some love,” Robbins says. “It spoke to both of us. I said, ‘The building's there. It's available. What's the worst that can happen?’” Together, they stripped the interior to its bare bones and remade it into the kind of place they wanted, with dark wood floors, leather chairs, fresh flowers and

gauzy white curtains.

They assembled the menu the same way: from the bottom up, starting with Italian staples such as marinara and Bolognese. They added menu items for people with dietary restrictions and other items they thought would appeal to locals, such as liver and onions. The Moscato version is served Marsala style. “So it's got an Italian twist, but it's liver and onions, basically,” Robbins says. And it's very successful, she adds: “People come just for that.”

Of course, Moscato (the chef) created Sicilian dishes using family recipes: spaghetti alla puttanesca (tomato sauce with olives, capers, anchovies and herbs); another spaghetti served with spicy marinara sauce and shrimp; a Sicilian ricotta cheesecake; and cannoli made with citrus, ricotta and chocolate chips. All of them are made from scratch.

“The philosophy is to try and keep the old ways of doing things, so they don't get lost,” Robbins says. “I think that's important ... to keep it authentic.”



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