

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 the food, the service, the room.

It's a special place, but not in that big, showy, "special occasion" way. Vessia is casual and comfortable. We've shared many meals here over the past five years. When my wife and I moved back to Orange County, it seemed like the perfect place to celebrate my mother's 80th birthday, so we reserved the atmosphere. We've come for more birthdays, for a get-out-of-the-house-the-day-after-Christmas dinner, and for a first lunch there, and it confirmed what I'd read in almost every mention of Vessia: it's a family place. Our spying ended when our lunches arrived. Mom had one of the specials, grigliata mista (\$23.95). By nightfall, it's a family place.

The menu ranges from pizzas (from \$11.50) to more sophisticated fish and meat specials (in the \$15-\$25 range). One recent night I met my wife and nearly 2-year-old son for dinner, but we were filled with a sense of occasion. Sure, Vessia is more casual than its white tablecloths would indicate. Still, a 2-year-old boy was present. Not to worry, our waiter told my wife while she waited for me to arrive. "He'll be fine; he's just a little shy." Our meal wasn't the best we've had here. My cuscinetto (\$19.95) -- skinless chicken breast rolled in a light sauce. 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 stroll through the restaurant. As you round the small lobby, traverse the snappy little bar and light into one of the earth-toned dining rooms. 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," says Vessia. "We tell our people to always recognize the regulars, and for people who aren't regulars, treat them like regulars." He has a few tricks he's picked up along a restaurateur route that began when he and his mother opened Vessia in 1982. After a dozen years, he jumped to open his own house in a spot where previous restaurants had failed. He and chef Gino Buonanoce worked with Vessia's mom to develop recipes to highlight Italy's regional specialties.

He joined the Chamber of Commerce and made friends among the politicians and the administrators

He works the room.

``I know when people go out, they want to go to a place where they feel comfortable, like they

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