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Italian Home Cooking Dressed Up to Please

By [ALICE GABRIEL](#)

Mima Vinoteca

VERY GOOD

THE SPACE A charming, plainly decorated vinoteca serving lovable rustic fare. Steps lead to front and back dining rooms. **THE CROWD** Tout Irvington. Dress is casual. The well-trained staff beams enthusiasm.

THE BAR Patrons can order from the menu at the full-service bar. Italian [wines](#) by the glass — mezzo or quartino — are the way to go.

THE BILL Small plates and salads, \$7 to \$11; cured meats and cheeses, \$7 to \$25, depending on number of selections; pastas, \$16 to \$19; entrees, \$21 to \$29; desserts, \$7 to \$8.

WHAT WE LIKE Soft polenta, fritto misto, brodetto, green pea soup (special), piave vecchio with date bread, arugula salad; rigatoni with veal Bolognese, trecece with soft egg and bacon, spaghettini with shrimp, stuffed trout, short ribs; bombolini, chocolate torte, orange panna cotta, bread pudding.

IF YOU GO Lunch: Tuesday to Friday, noon to 3:30 p.m. Dinner: Tuesday to Thursday, 5 to 10 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 5 to 11 p.m.; Sunday, 4 to 9 p.m. Reservations strongly recommended. Street parking.

ON my first visit to Mima, a stylish little vinoteca on Irvington's steep Main Street, our young waiter made a bold call: "You're going to love it here," he said. It was the sort of remark that would usually give me pause — I don't like to be told what I'm going to think about an experience I haven't had. But his tone was less boastful than matter-of-fact, and as it turned out, he was right.

Mima is a hot spot — jammed on weekends, busy on weeknights — but it's also a very personal place, intimate and neighborhoody. There is nothing fancy, and nothing cheap, about it, and it seems to have answered a longing in a village where good restaurants are as thick as day lilies on a sunny slope.

The plain décor is strictly Old World: black and white tile, pressed tin, red brick, bare wood. Graceful mirrors and leather banquettes add elegance, but the rough napkins may be mistaken for dish cloths. The shotgun layout includes an airy front room with an inviting bar; a large alcove with a single generous table; and a quieter back room with walls the color of milk chocolate.

On one wall is a prominent photo of an Italian woman pressing grapes; sensibly attired in floral housecoat and white apron, she seems to smile approvingly upon Mima's entire enterprise. Vintage photos of a white-haired woman bent over an infant and of an elderly couple cutting a tiered cake add to the theme of happy famiglia. Mercifully, there is no TV in sight.

John Leggio, the on-site manager, owns Mima with two other Leggios, his uncle Phillip and cousin Robert, and Armando Santucci (the last three also own the pioneering Zuppa in Yonkers).

In Italian families, “mima” is an affectionate name for a grandmother, and in Italy, a mima’s standard repertory may include rich Bolognese, a good roasted chicken and tender gnocchi. The kitchen at Mima, overseen by Daniel Van Etten, embraces *la buona cucina* — the best home cooking — and dresses it up a little, but not too much. The one-page seasonal menu, with its honest prices, starts with *piatti piccoli* (so much more fun to say than “small plates”), and the first one — fluffy polenta capped with fava beans, crispy prosciutto, tiny tomatoes and leaves of garlic — was the sort of dish that secures a mima’s reputation.

The start of summer was also regaled with a beautiful pea soup swirled with Parmesan cream. *Fritto misto*, charmingly packaged in a paper-lined box and sprinkled with fennel salt, had a fried-food lover asking, “Can we order another one?” The *brodetto*’s delicate tomato broth was a perfect environment for fresh clams and mussels.

From the well-edited selection of salumi and formaggi, I chose the hard, nutty *piave vecchio*, cut in neat triangles and served with moist date bread and quince paste. A salad of petite arugula, fried artichokes, shaved Parmesan and candylike cherry tomatoes had a bright, lemony dressing; I ate big forkfuls and wanted more.

Two less successful starters were dry rounds of salty duck sausage twinned with a very sweet *caponata*, and lovely, creamy *burrata mozzarella* — the new “it” cheese — paired with a listless *panzanella* (bread salad) that was probably not up to most mimas’ standards.

Pastas are handmade. *Rigatoni* with veal Bolognese was wonderfully hearty. *Spaghettini* tossed with shrimp, arugula, San Marzano tomatoes, fresh basil and sweet onions was more summery. *Curlicue trecce* with a fresh egg, black pepper, onions and smoked bacon — a beautiful dish — evolved into a delicious creamy mass as I worked my way to the bottom of the bowl.

Among entrees, my favorite was a fat Hudson Valley trout stuffed with capers, olives, onion, tomato and *fagiolini*, the whole perfumed with lemon-pressed olive oil. Pan-roasted chicken wore a fun bonnet of frizzled leeks, but the spinach alongside it was acrid with browned garlic. I liked the slender carrots and the tiny pearl onions that came with meltingly good short ribs — a house specialty — and so I forgave the heavy spinach *gnocchi* that were also part of the mix.

Waiters wear T-shirts that admonish patrons to “drink wine.” Take their advice; the all-Italian selection has 22 [wines](#) by the glass (not including specials and dessert wines). Glasses are listed as “mezzo (3 ounces)” or “quartino (6 ounces)”; the smaller pours allow diners to match a wine with each course.

On a sultry night, I welcomed the pale-peach 2006 La Scolca Rosé Chiary and *Vino Bravo*’s 2007 Manzoni Bianco, with its Bartlett pear and lemon notes. The rosé prosecco from Mionetto (\$13 a flute) was delicate and delicious. For red, I liked the fruity 2005 Sardinian “*Vignaruja*” cannonau from Il Nuraghi. (All were \$6 for a mezzo glass.)

Italians traditionally play down desserts, but Mima has some beauties. Try the little *ricotta* fritters dusted with powdered sugar; the deep, dark *torta di cioccolato*; the refreshing orange *panna cotta* with clementine jam; or the cakey, cinnamon-kissed bread pudding studded with brandied prunes.