

# Dining Out

O'AHU'S ANSWER TO YOUR APPETITE

FEBRUARY 6-12, 2005



## Tutto Buono!

Chef Francesco Valentini tells Barbara George and George Vandeman that Sergio's new menu is good to go



### All You Need Is Love. Oh, And A Reservation!

Valentine's Day is Monday, February 14th, and we've got romantic ways to help you celebrate. While you enjoy a casual Dinner at the oceanside Rainbow Lanai or Village Steak & Seafood, or a specially created multi-course Dinner menu at Ball by the Sea, enter to win a special "Natural Elegance" treatment for two at Mandara Spa.\* For reservations and information call **808.949.4321**, or visit: [www.HiltonHawaiianVillage.com/dining](http://www.HiltonHawaiianVillage.com/dining)

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SERGIO'S

[coverstory]

## Owners to 'wow' guests with new menu

### Chef Francesco Valentini adds authentic Italian touch to Sergio's

So where's the meat in the veal Milanese at Sergio's? Not in plain view, the thin slices of pounded veal are buried beneath a bed of arugula leaves and cherry tomatoes, giving this dish more of a deceptive *insalata* (salad) appearance than a main entree.

"I asked them to serve it without the salad the last time I had it and, I'll admit, that was a huge mistake," said owner George Vandeman, a semi-retired mergers-and-acquisitions attorney whose first contact with the islands was to help stave off a Mainland company's hostile takeover of Aloha Airlines in the 1980s.

Since the appointment of Italian native Francesco Valentini as executive chef consultant, the food at Sergio's has dramatically changed ... and for the better.

Bellicose and good-humored, Valentini described the new menu changes as simple, delicious and, most importantly, authentic.

"I do what I know best," said this Tuscan native, who — when not consulting — assumes a role of personal chef for private parties. "And what I do best is cook Italian food."

That he does. His veal Milanese, for example, is light and refreshingly garnished with a lemon purse. It's a dish that's as good as any *mama-and-nonna* trattoria in Italy.

Three years and the same number of chefs and managers later, Sergio's is finally living up to its potential.

"We want to wow our guests," said general manager Kyle Matsumoto, placing an emphasis on wow. "We have a menu that's constantly evolving with dishes that you won't find anywhere else except here."

A case in point is the savory *ribollita minestrone* (\$5.50), a classic Tuscan soup that's

### Sergio's

**Where:** Hilton Hawaiian Village Beach Resort & Spa

**Hours:** Nightly from 5 to 11 p.m.

**Call:** 951-6900

**Note:** The restaurant can accommodate private parties of up to 18 guests.

100-percent vegetarian, according to Valentini.

"It's a vegetable-stock-based soup with Canellini beans and maybe with a piece of bread," he said. "It's a flavorful but light soup."

And it doesn't contain elbow macaroni, laughed Barbara George, a Los Angeles-based business coach who's engaged to Vandeman.

"It's robust," she said. "But it doesn't weigh you down like other minestrone soups you would find at other restaurants."

In fact, a lot of the new dishes here aren't overwhelming in portion. They're just right.

For example, the fettuccine Alfredo (\$16.95 or \$11.95 as a side dish that's enough for two) and the fresh spinach tagliatelle tossed in a countryside Tuscan-style ragu (\$16.95) more than satisfy.

Valentini's ragu (meat sauce) is as homemade as they come. It's also an excellent example of Italian-style comfort food. The sauce is prepared with at least 60 pounds of different meats — including beef, lamb, veal, pork and pancetta — which are simmered in fresh tomatoes, herbs and spices for two to two-and-a-half hours.

"This dish and the veal Milanese convinced me on the spot to hire Francesco," said Vandeman, who first tried the two dishes during a private party at his former rental home in Kahala. "From that point on, I was hooked."

In a collaborative effort to "wow" guests, Vandeman, George, Valentini and Matsumoto plan to keep the dining



Owners Barbara George and George Vandeman enjoy a romantic pre-Valentine's Day champagne toast.

experience at Sergio's as authentically Italian as possible.

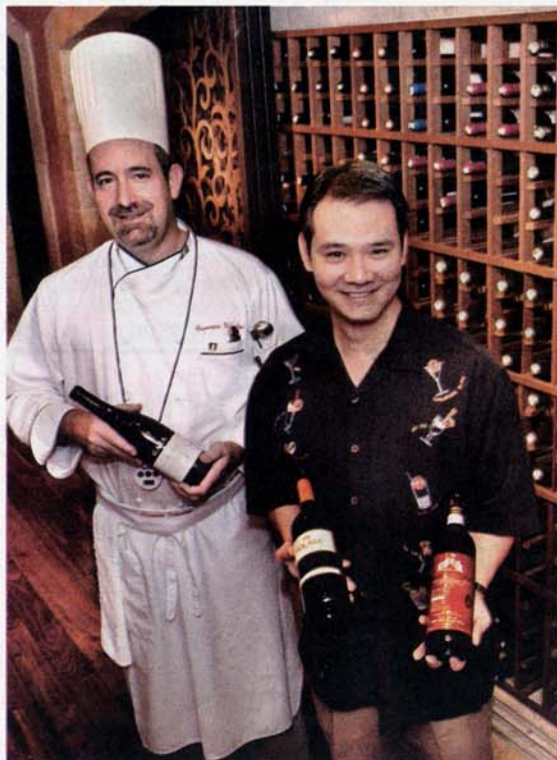
Vandeman even went through the trouble of securing 14 original Enrico Sereni paintings from a Tuscan art dealer, making him the largest collector of Sereni paintings in the U.S.

"I want people to feel that they're in Tuscany when they dine here," Vandeman said, while pointing to the Sereni paintings and a wall-length mural of Positano, a quaint Italian town located along the famed Amalfi Coast. "I want to be able to share and convey that Italian romance among our guests."

This month, Sergio's will not only celebrate Valentine's Day with a special \$60 set menu (available from Feb. 10 to 14), but also *carnevale*, which is the last hurrah before Lent.

And according to tradition, the "huge dinner" that will be served during *carnevale* will include lasagna with meat and risotto among many other festive foods.

"We're going to celebrate all the obscure Italian holidays," Vandeman said. "It's going to be Italian chic, but whimsical."



Francesco Valentini and Kyle Matsumoto help guests select their wines.