



Mambo Italiano's Fruitti del Mare.

montana italian

The flavors of Italy
thrive in Montana

{ Mambo Italiano, Whitefish
Emerson Grill, Bozeman
Adagio, Livingston }



Erica Coffman is one of the delightful servers at Mambo Italiano in Whitefish.

It must be the wine, I tell myself.
It must be the wine.

But after settling in to my table at Mambo Italiano restaurant in Whitefish, I quickly realize it isn't the wine; it's the atmosphere that has made me lightheaded.

The clank of pans echoes throughout the restaurant from the open kitchen, where chef Brad Townsend runs his line crew, and the seductive smell of pastas, seafood and hand-tossed pizzas drifts above our heads. The waitresses float about the dining area, catering to our every whim.

It must be the wine.

But it's not.

It's because at Mambo Italiano you are wrapped in a familial glow of good company, warm atmosphere and noisy chatter, just the setting that you'd imagine big Italian families enjoying at their Tuscan villa. The service is impeccable, the food fantastic. It's not the wine making your face glow.

On this night we begin our journey through Italy with Mambo's Tootsie Rolls: ricotta cheese, mozzarella, and pesto wrapped in thin, whole egg wrappers and then deep fried and drizzled with marinara sauce. Accompanying a glass of Sangiovese, the explosion of flavors is enough to make your head reel.

Next stop on the Mambo menu is the Nachos All' Italiana. This funky little delicacy is just one of the western translations of Italian food that Townsend has introduced to the menu, which reflects an immigrant style of Italian food served with Old World flair. The nachos are piled high on a serving platter. Melted cheese sauce cascades down the sides of the lightly fried pasta sheets that have been covered in a meatball and prosciutto Alfredo sauce and topped just right with pepperoncini and black olives. This appetizer is truly stunning.

It's a Monday night and by 7 p.m. the place is already packed. The crowd, as usual, is eclectic. A family of four enjoys their dinner huddled

around each other while a young couple dressed for the evening is engrossed in deep conversation next to them. A table of eight women on a girls' night out feeds into the atmosphere, laughing and carrying on. "You'll never have one of our servers tell you to quiet down," Townsend says.

The wait staff seem to know just how much attention to bestow upon you, and even amid this electrically charged atmosphere, a conversational tête-à-tête is possible. We'd been told that the night before a well-known car racer had dined at Mambo's, and recently a top NFL coach had supped here. >>>

taste of **montana**



Mambo Italiano's Pollo Conformaggio

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Panna cotta, one of Mambo Italiano's signature desserts.

Heidi Long photos



Mambo Italiano co-owner Doug McNicoll, left, stands with Erica Coffman, center, and co-owner Brad Townsend.

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With families dining next to the occasional movie star or professional athlete, Mambo's atmosphere has the effect of putting everyone at ease. That's true even in Montana, where you check your status and executive title at the border.

I'd expected a bit slower night for a Monday in September, but the joint was hopping. Still it's nothing like the 300 dinners that the restaurant cranks out on a busy night. Townsend, in his sixth year at the helm of Mambo's, feeds off the energy created each night. "When you have great food, great service and a great product, people come and create that next element: atmosphere," he says.

Tonight, however, the only stars are on our plates. After we finish off the Italian nachos, a subtle Pinot Noir carries us into our next course. I settle on the Cozze: steamed mussels, Parmesan cheese and basil served — or should I say gently resting on — a bed of languorous linguine. The staff has no problem with me substituting the light sauce with a marinara, so that the wine/cozze combination sees its full potential. Steam drifts out of the shells as I pry them open and the small, tight mussels melt in my mouth. Around our table the other guests are similarly dazed as they lap up their Pasta Ravenna, Fettucine Alla Lulubella and Pollo con Formaggio. Already we're eyeing the dessert menu.

The classic tiramisu has layers of chocolate, creamy mousse and a base of ladyfingers soaked in espresso. As if that weren't enough, we took a side trip down the Italian world of desserts with the Panna Cotta. Similar to the texture of a crème brulee, the Panna Cotta is a custard-like, cooked cream sensation that is delightfully reserved, yet sweet enough to make an exclamation point on a fine meal. Stepping out into the night after this experience at Mambo's, I was ecstatic, buzzed from taking a trip around a world of tastes, sounds and sights.

On this night, it wasn't the wine. It was Mambo's. •

— Dave Reese

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Mambo Italiano founder and co-owner Brad Townsend is in his sixth year working on the line.

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