

# That's Mambo's!

By Greg Lemon  
Photos by Jeremy Lurgio

Tucked just off the main drag in downtown Whitefish is a small Italian restaurant reminiscent of Chicago or New York. The ceiling is low, the tables close together, the music loud and smooth, and the waitresses funny and friendly. The kitchen is open to the entire restaurant and patrons sit only a few feet away from cooks tossing pizza dough.

Mambo Italiano is a flashy restaurant focused on service and quality. The waitresses greet you with a smile and stay at your table long enough to tell a good joke or describe their favorite menu item.





Three things make Mambo's stand out from other restaurants: Price, food, experience. "A family of four can come and experience high-quality, big-city Italian food for \$40. That's Mambo's."

The tables are covered in butcher paper and when the waitresses greet the diners, she writes her name at the end so they remember. If there's a spare chair she might sit down and tell you all about her favorite dishes or how deep the powder was that day up at the ski hill.

Johanna Johnson has worked at Mambo's for more than four years. She can tell you just about everything you'd ever want to know about the place. With straight blond hair and a flashy smile, her job is making friends with the customers. "Everybody here's welcome," she said.

"Many of the patrons are repeat customers," Johanna said. And to make the point, a couple walks through the door and calls over to her. The two are probably old enough to be her parents, but she smiles, waves and shows them to their table.

The scene was typical and replayed itself throughout the night with other waitresses and staff. Many of the staff I spoke with had served up piping hot home-cooked Italian food for more than a year.

While I was enjoying a Mambo's Ale and waiting for my first course, "Saint Peter" walked through the door.

Peter is a local vegetarian with an eclectic taste in pizza. When Mambo's first opened, he would come in and special order a pizza – the same one every time: pesto, mozzarella, mushrooms, onions and shrimp with extra virgin olive oil. The problem was that pizza wasn't on the menu at the time. Still, they'd fix it for him anyway.

Eventually, he'd just show up and they got his pizza together for him. No one had to ask and Peter never had to order.

Though the pizza isn't a typical Italian dish, it finally made the menu and has become a recommended item -- "Pizza Santo Pietro (St. Peter)."



Of course Mambo's wouldn't be the place it is, if it weren't for the quality food. The menu is full of variety and personal flavor. They serve everything from pasta to chicken parmesan, including some low-carb dishes, and their wine list is long and distinguished.

The secret is in the ingredients. The owners have searched around the country and found the highest quality ingredients, such as their ricotta cheese. It comes from a small distributor in Chicago and has a shelf life of 12 days. That can be unhandy, but it's such an essential ingredient in many of their dishes that accommodations are made. Obviously, nothing is substituted for quality.

The same goes for the wine, because what's great Italian food without a fine glass of red. You can have a glass of house wine for \$5 or a bottle of specialty wine for \$150.

But the food has a supremely wholesome and hearty quality, as if it came right out of your Italian grandmother's kitchen.

It's the kind of food the Italians brought with them to America

and in many ways it's reflective of the culture's blue-collar roots. It's the kind of food that will fill you up after a long day on the slopes of Big Mountain Ski Resort or hiking Glacier National Park.

Take for instance the linguini alle vongole, a spicy seafood pasta dish. The pasta and sauce are served on a dried piece of homemade bread, just as poor Italian wives served it to their working husbands. They couldn't afford to throw bread away, so when it got stale they'd serve it in the bottom of a large bowl, covered in pasta.

Combine that kind of historical flavor with premium ingredients and you've found a unique Italian menu.

I wish I could suggest just one dish from their menu, but it would simply be too difficult. On the evening I visited Mambo's, I started with the linguini alle vongole and a glass of Mambo's Ale. They served it with a dish of their signature garlic bread, which came hot and covered in Parmesan cheese.

The second course was one of their famous thin-crust pizzas.



But you won't find the pizza I ate on the menu. When I asked my waitress, Erica, for a recommendation, she decided to put her head together with Johanna and they came up with their own recipe.

The result was a delicious personal pizza covered in prosciutto, sliced so thin it was transparent, sausage, onions and mushrooms and piled high with cheese.

They brought it out with my second glass of ale. When I was done and couldn't imagine feeling more satisfied, they brought me out a glass of red house wine. Erica and Johanna pressed me, but I just couldn't fit in dessert.

When you come to Mambo's, be ready to take your time and soak it all in: the engaging waitresses, the high-topped tables, the pizza-flinging cooks. Draw on the tables, drink a glass or two of wine, and sing along with Dean Martin crooning over the speakers.

That's Mambo's.

Location: Mambo Italiano is located at 234 E. 2nd Street, Whitefish.

Hours: M-F, 5-9 p.m.; Sat & Sun, 5-10. Tel: 406.863.9600. 



~ Greg Lemon is a freelance journalist in Hamilton, Montana. When he's not scrambling around the state following a story, Greg will likely be outside enjoying Montana's fringe benefits. His work has also appeared in Montana Living, Bugle and Big Sky Journal.