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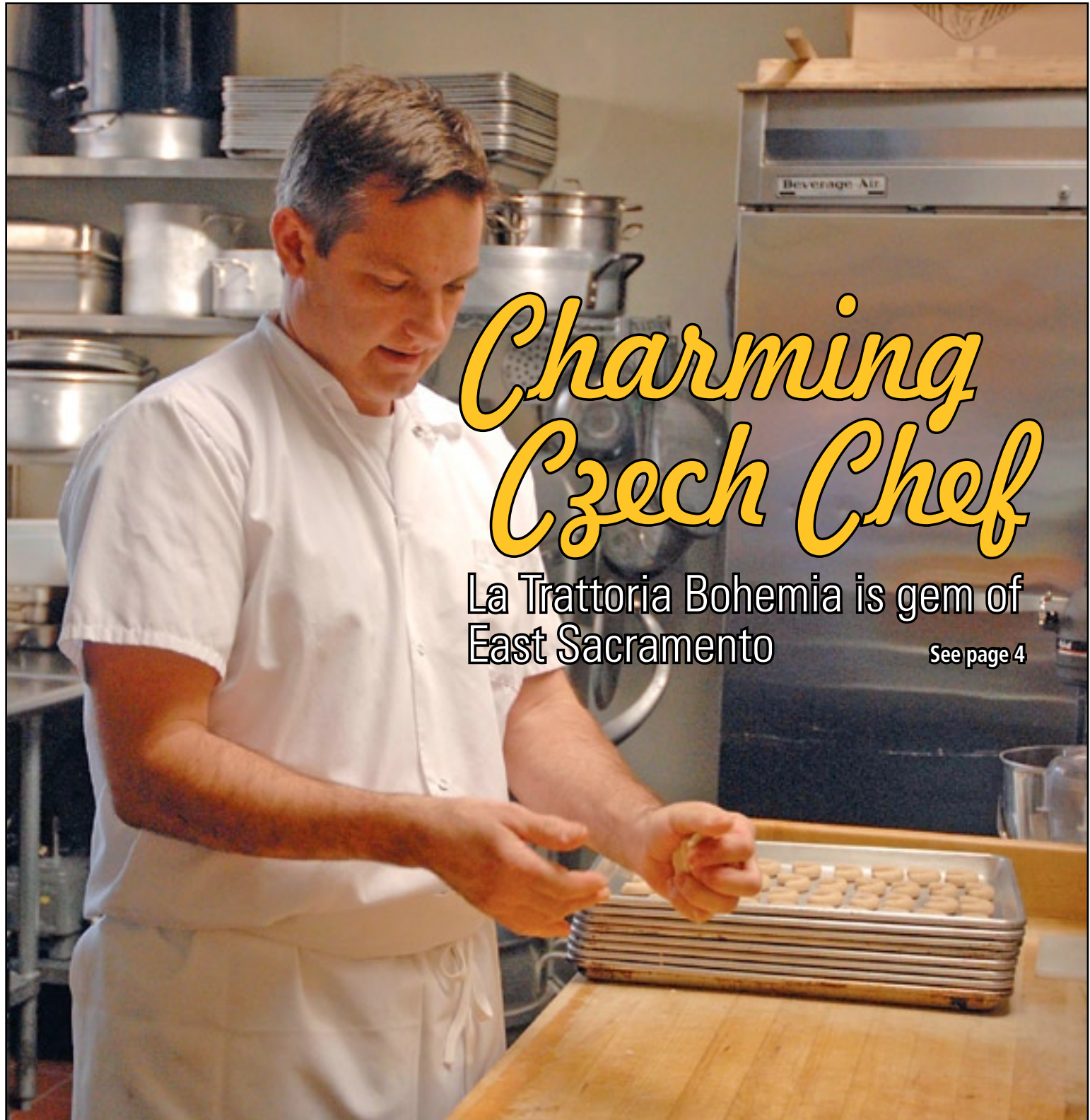
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Know your neighbor

A little slice of Italy and Czechoslovakia with a Yankee twist: La Trattoria Bohemia is gem of East Sacramento

By SUSAN LAIRD
East Sacramento News Writer
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Tucked into the side of J Street in midtown Sacramento is one of the little-known restaurant gems that make living in this region such a delight.

Featuring simple, authentic Italian and Czechoslovakian dishes, La Trattoria Bohemia has developed a loyal following. Despite the international flavor and flair, however, there is a timeless American tale here also.

"It's been a roller coaster ride, that's for sure," said Mark Lastuvka, who owns the restaurant with his wife, Romana. "I am originally from Prague; my wife is also from Czechoslovakia. When the Berlin Wall came down in '89, I went through that whole revolution thing. That was fun."

Fun? Lastuvka means it.

"Imagine being a part of changing history," he said. "You're scared, but you want to do it. Those were great times."

This desire to make a better future is what fueled the passions of those who founded the United States, and all those who immigrated here. Lastuvka found himself caught up in the energy of the time.

"We had the revolution in '89. We married in '89. Then, in September of 1990, we came over here," he said. "We came to Sacramento because Romana's father lived here after he escaped the communists years before. I came with no English and only \$10 in my pocket."

Lastuvka's father-in-law helped the couple out in the beginning.

"My father-in-law got me a bike, and I signed up at the Winterstein Adult School to learn English," he said. "While I was at the Winterstein School, I met some Italian kids. They worked at the Roma Pizzeria. They wanted to play soccer on Wednesday nights, so they asked if I wanted a job."

The dish-washing job grew to be an every night affair. Lastuvka learned how to make pizzas, as he continued to learn English. He pursued every opportunity to "make it" in this country.

"My degree is in building fine furniture," he said. "I worked on remodeling



Tucked into the side of J Street in East Sacramento is La Trattoria Bohemia, one of the little-known restaurant gems that make living in this region such a delight. *East Sacramento News Photos/Tom Paniagua*

homes for 10 years, and I continued to work at Roma's. In the beginning I worked every day. My wife worked for Raley's and cleaned houses. She eventually became a flight attendant for Continental."

Lastuvka credits his mandatory military service in the Czechoslovakian army for developing his work ethic.

"At the time, I didn't want to do it," he said. "But you become independent. You learn to make your own decisions. I think (military service) should be mandatory for everyone."

Eventually, the Lastuvkas were able to save enough to take the next steps in the American dream. They purchased a home in Carmichael. The birth of their daughter, Nicola, also spurred changes in their lives.

"I was working my ass off," he said. "I decided to take a risk. I saw an emp-

ty pork store on J Street and decided to open a restaurant. We partnered with Maria Gurrera, the owner of Roma's Pizzeria. We had become friends when I was working at Roma's. That's why the food here is Czech food and Italian. We were eventually able to buy her out, but she helped us to get our start and we are good friends to this day."

The effort to build the restaurant was literally from the ground up.

"It's a good thing I had been doing remodels all those years," Lastuvka said. "I redid the plumbing, the electrical, everything needed replacement."

La Trattoria Bohemia opened in 2000. The little restaurant will celebrate 10 years on June 21.

The menu at La Trattoria is simple and delicious. Make that simply delicious. It offers over 50 items, plus an impressive selection of Italian pizzas.

Favorite Czech specialties include Bavarian Goulash, in which tender pork is stewed in sauerkraut to a thick broth. This is served with swirls of sour cream and Czech dumplings (\$17); and Schnitzel, where the customer's choice of fresh breaded chicken breasts or pork are served with European-style potato salad or roasted rosemary potatoes (\$17).

All pastas and breads are made from scratch at La Trattoria. With the same devotion he dedicated to fine furniture, Lastuvka crafts fine meals with particular attention to detail. His Spinach Ricotta Gnocchi is crafted by hand, and is served with fresh creamy gorgonzola sauce with prosciutto and mushrooms (\$16.50). Colorful red-to-

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Gang wars on Janey Way



By **MARTY RELLES**
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One warm fall night in 1963, I sat alone in the living room of my family's house watching television. Mom and dad had gone out with my little brother John. My brother Terry loitered on the front porch with our friend Bob Pesce, chattering away. As my eyes wandered over toward the big bay window in front of the house, something caught my eye. A car drove slowly down the street in front of the house and someone yelled something from it. The car then proceeded forward toward the dead end of the street. This seemed unusual, so I focused my attention out the window. Sure enough, when the car came back up the street, it stopped in front of our house and three young men got out of the car and moved quickly toward the front porch.

Immediately, I took action. I hurried to the back bedroom, went into the closet and picked up a toy wooden military rifle. Then, I returned to the front of the house and opened the front door half way. The three young men stood threateningly at the foot of the porch and taunted Terry and Bob. I recognized all three of them: Pennisi and Puglesi from 55th street and another boy named Leitrich from River Park. Showing them the silhouette of the toy rifle, I yelled out, "Get out of here, now!"

They must have believed I had a real gun because they turned and walked away quickly. However, when they reached the sidewalk, Pennisi said, "This isn't over, we'll be back."

After they left, I spent the rest of the evening on the front porch keeping an eye on Terry and Bob. Nothing happened.

The next day, a Saturday, passed quietly. On Sunday night, my family went over to my Grandma Petta's house as usual for cake and coffee. When we returned, we went into our house to watch "The Ed Sullivan Show." A few minutes later, I heard a knock at the door and went over to answer it. Bob Pesce stood on the porch and said that Pennisi and the 55th street boys wanted to see me right away. On the street, two gangs of boys faced each other: the Janey Way group on my side and the 55th Street boys on the other.

I walked through the group of boys into the center of the melee.

"What's going on here?" I asked.

"I'm here to settle up for the other night," said Pennisi. "And how do you propose to do that?" I asked.

Before Pennisi could answer, my dad, a Sacramento police officer, walked over and stood beside me.

"What is going on here?" dad asked.

"These boys started a fight," said Pennisi. My dad responded, "Well it's over now, you boys take a hike." He then turned to the Janey Way gang and said, "You boys go on home." The 55th Street boys got into their cars and left. As I walked back to the house with my dad, he didn't say a word, but I think he was proud of me that night for keeping my cool and not starting the fight.

In school at Sacramento High the next day, I heard some rumblings about a fight on Janey Way. That was all. The 55th street boys never returned. Now the great gang war on Janey Way is only a memory.



East Sacramento News
Photos/Tom Paniagua

Delicious deserts available at East Sacramento's La Trattoria Bohemia: Tiramisu and (inset) Apple Strudel.

(left) Mark Lastuvka is making Czech Christmas cookies.

Trattoria: 'Some people come (just) for the cookies'

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matoes garnish this beautiful entrée. Portions are filling and delicious.

A meal at La Trattoria cannot be considered complete without something from the dessert menu. Try a Gelati Celesti, which is an ice cream truffle (\$4.50), or an Artisan Trio Sorbetto, which is three scoops of delicious Italian sorbet (\$5). The Apple Strudel is a generously sized flaky pastry stuffed with a mixture of apples, raisins, walnuts, cinnamon – all sweetened with vanilla sugar (\$4.50). The Tiramisu is a dream. Layers of lady finger cookies are drenched in coffee and liquor, alternated with layers of mascarpone cream cheese (\$5).

There is a generous wine list and the beer list is known for its international selections.

In Italy, a trattoria is a family-run institution. Food and service are casual, warm and personal. Clients become regulars at trattorie because the staff learns their preferences. It's all about family.

"My mom walks here often," said Vivian Johnston, who grew up in East Sacramento and now lives in Bend, Ore. "I love to come here every time I come home. There is a warm atmosphere, the prices are reasonable and it's a good neighborhood place."

The draw of "la famiglia" brings regulars from throughout the region. "My wife and I come here once a week, and have done so for the last two years," said John Lindgren, a former East Sacramento resident who now resides in the Pocket area. "We eat out about five times a week. We come to La Trattoria Bohemia because there's no turn over in staff, it's very consistent. We know everybody and they know us. The food is excellent."

In addition to the regular menu, the Lastuvkas offer weekly specials. Regulars often call ahead to learn of the specials, and to order an

additional loaf of handcrafted artisan bread to take home.

"I just make another for the oven," Lastuvka said.

Those who love traditional Czech cookies are known to place orders for these specialty items a year in advance, because it takes three weeks to craft these wonderful treats.

"Some people come only for the cookies," he said. "These are made only once a year. The dough takes a week to make, and the baking process takes days. Some will be filled with creams, others powdered with sugar. They all sell out."

Lindgren enjoys introducing his "foodie friends" to this little restaurant. He raves about the excellence of the menu.

"We have certain favorites, but we tell our friends that this place has the best pizza in Sacramento," he said. "The crust is phenomenal and the sauce is wonderful. Our foodie friends go crazy over some of the beers. It's a cozy place. You never have a bad experience here."

La Trattoria Bohemia is located at 3649 J Street in Sacramento. Hours are Tuesday through Thursday and Sunday from 11:30 a.m. to 9 p.m.; Friday and Saturday from 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. Closed Monday. For catering options and private party reservations, call (916) 455-7803. Also visit www.latrattoriaboheemia.com.

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