

Savor



Max-a-Mia Ristorante

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By Spencer Caldwell
Photographs by Patrick Raycraft

Heading to my dinner date at Max-a-Mia Ristorante in Avon, the oldest surviving Max restaurant, I found myself inventing humorous names for the next. Max-a-Million. Max Daddy. Maxed Out. Whatever its name, would anyone bet against it?

Founded by Richard Rosenthal, the Max Restaurant Group has produced the most successful and diverse collection of high-end dining establishments Connecticut has seen. The formula seems pretty simple—highly trafficked locations downtown or in affluent suburbs, attentive and knowledgeable service, carefully sourced food

that's innovative yet approachable, and a restaurant culture that makes customers feel valued. But I don't want to minimize Rosenthal's unerring restaurant instincts and ability to pick like-minded business partners.

An anecdote from my first visit to Max-a-Mia may best explain the Max restaurants' success. I coyly asked our waiter if the restaurant would stand behind any price on our copy of the wine list (bottles \$29-\$89, glasses \$6.75-\$12). I then pointed out a typo, a 2011 Spy Valley Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough, New Zealand, listed at "10/14," 14 probably being the quartino rather than bottle price.

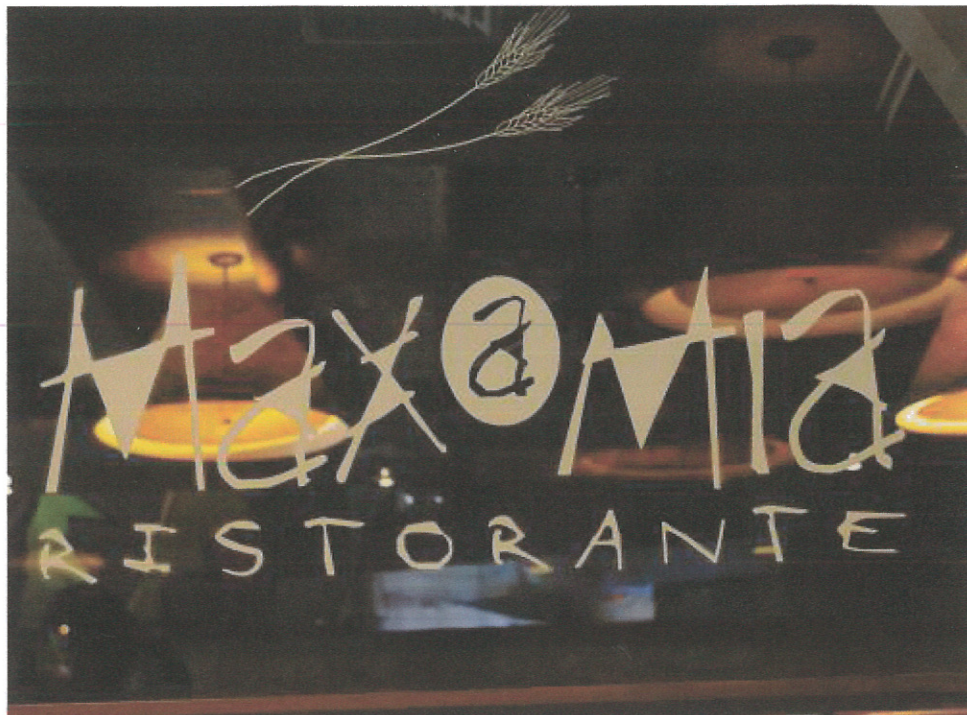
Our waiter showed our wine list to a manager and returned with the wine and a chiller, saying "That's a \$26 savings!" My point isn't that one may find a typo (certainly not the next night) and hold a Max restaurant's feet to the fire, but that one can always count on being handled with class.

My recent reviews have shown that one can't take for granted being promptly welcomed, led to a reserved table that matches expressed preferences, and greeted by a server within seconds—let alone being swarmed by staff clearing extra place settings and bringing menus, a wine list, ice water, fresh bread, house-cured





Grilled Atlantic salmon with fresh fava beans and guanciale



olives with an extra bowl for the pits, and half heads of roasted garlic. But wouldn't most people prefer to patronize a restaurant where such a reception is the norm? Which may explain why Max-a-Mia is almost always packed and seems to have a dual appeal, drawing as many hipsters as blue bloods to its triangular dining room, popular lounge and airy patio.

Some restaurant groups fail to put a serious chef at the head of each outlet. Not the Max restaurants. Max-a-Mia's new executive chef is David Stickney, previous chef de cuisine at Max Amore, whom Rosenthal and managing

partner Bradford Karsky credit with rejuvenating the Avon concern, now in its 21st year. Sous chef Scott Well and pastry chef Monika Brown should be credited with an assist.

Max-a-Mia mostly captures the essence of Italian—simple, fresh, delicious. Soups appear as specials, insufficiently highlighted by staff. A cup of braised pork shoulder, bean and escarole soup (\$4.95) was as flavorful as it was robust. From the salad section, we relished the Tuscan (\$7.95), which featured mixed greens, kalamata olives, polenta croutons, roasted garlic cloves, grape tomatoes and bocconcini Mozzarella in a balsamic

vinaigrette.

As has lately become popular, Max-a-Mia also has a nice antipasti section, including a fairly extensive selection of salumi and formaggi, which can be ordered individually (\$2-\$4.95) or in combinations (\$14.95-\$29.95). But I couldn't resist ordering the burrata (\$8.95) instead. Like a snow white water balloon, the fat bladder of Mozzarella was filled with a luscious mixture of cream and Mozzarella, surrounded by toybox heirloom tomato slices, and dressed with Tuscan extra virgin olive oil, sea salt, cracked black pepper and basil.

Point Judith calamari (\$8.95)

were seasoned and cooked so assertively that they were less the featured ingredient than a canvas for the spices, cherry peppers, lemon aioli and spicy marinara that accompanied them. We enjoyed them nevertheless. Stem-on artichokes (\$8.95) were crispy fried and served over prosciutto di Parma with shaved Grana Padano and a Saba vinaigrette—to good effect. We also savored a Black Angus sirloin carpaccio (\$8.95) dressed with crushed black pepper and a tomato caper relish and finished with arugula and shaved Parmigiano-Reggiano.

But our favorite appetizer was mussels in a broth laced with chorizo, cremini mushrooms, tomatoes and sweet vermouth, an addictive combination, which, after we'd exhausted the pair of triangular toasts garnishing it, sent us scrambling for more bread to soak up every last drop.

Pastas and pizzas were exceedingly well prepared. Americans prefer to make a meal of the Italian pasta course, so the Max-a-penne (\$16.95), true comfort food, came loaded with grilled chicken, escarole, tomato, garlic, extra virgin olive oil and Parmigiano-Reggiano. We couldn't resist adding good sweet Italian sausage (\$4 extra) to it. A littleneck clam stone pie (\$14.95) was even better, the surface of the chewy, almost-thin-crust pizza carpet-bombed with clams, cockles, pancetta, sweet garlic cloves, fried capers and Mozzarella. The combination was just brilliant.

The entrées we tried ranged



Stone pie with arugula, prosciutto and California figs

from very good to great. Presented in four pieces, a Murray's wood-fired half chicken (\$17.95) was served with terrific garlic mashed potatoes and roasted vegetables, the fowl perfectly cooked but under-seasoned. As sweet and beautifully bronzed as la garota de Ipanema, eight translucent Bomster sea scallops (\$24.95) encircled a salad of chick peas, English cucumber and balsamic-marinaded red onion in a couscous vinaigrette.

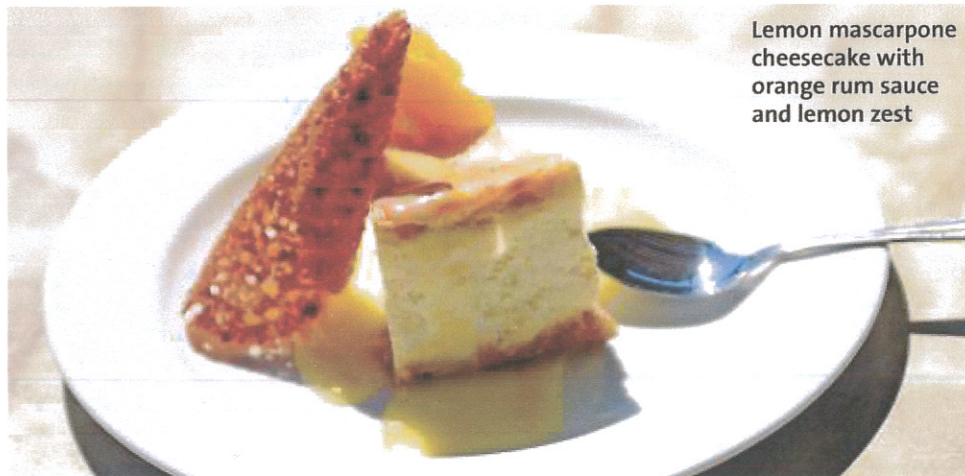
A wonderful slab of oak-grilled Atlantic salmon (\$23.95) had a lovely crunchy edging and a moist medium-rare interior. The salmon was served over fava beans, caramelized fennel and guanciale and topped with an herb salad of fennel fronds, chives and flat-leaf parsley dressed with citrus-pressed extra virgin olive oil. A satisfying 14-ounce, gremolata-marinated, wood-grilled New York strip steak (\$30.95) sprawling over olive-oil-glazed baby vegetables and fingerling potatoes was fin-

ished with sea salt and red wine jus.

And, oh lord, the desserts! An individual Bosc pear tart served with Madagascar vanilla ice cream (\$6.95, as are all the desserts) was taken to another level by the almond flavor and texture of frangipane. I usually have little fondness for flourless chocolate cake, but Max-a-Mia's was chocolatey, light and barely sweet rather than rich and fudgy. I also have little affection for cheesecake, but a moist, light yet creamy lemon ricotta cheesecake might have been the best I've ever had. And finally, a white chocolate polenta cake served over zabaglione was a revelation in taste and texture.

Rosenthal rotates among his restaurants, dining at a different one every night. On my second visit to Max-a-Mia, I spotted Steven Abrams, one of Rosenthal's partners, out with his wife and kids. Of course, Max restaurants are said to be great people-watching spots. And it must be true. At the end of that visit, *Hartford Magazine's* own illustrious CEO turned up with his lovely wife.

Spencer Caldwell has worked both sides of the aisle. He is a long-time restaurant critic and food writer. He has also worked as the director of quality control for a Manhattan-based fast food chain, as a wine steward for an upscale Westchester restaurant, and as a restaurant developer and consultant.



Lemon mascarpone cheesecake with orange rum sauce and lemon zest