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FEATURED

Burlingame's Stella makes a move

Same food and tradition, but now on Burlingame Avenue

Nicholas Mazzoni Daily Journal staff

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Alisa Ferrari laughs while talking with one of her employees at the host stand.

Nicholas Mazzoni/Daily Journal



Love, family traditions and a little crazy is Alisa and Matteo Ferrari's recipe to a successful restaurant.

For the last 18 years, Burlingame's hidden gem, Stella Alpina Osteria, outgrew its elongated name and quaint location on Primrose Road.

Now named Stella, its new location at 1448 Burlingame Ave. opened March 13. It features a large 16-seat horseshoe-shaped bar, a wine bridge display that overlooks one of the dining rooms. It also has six private dining rooms and a covered outdoor dining area that seats up to 60 guests, for a total of 200 seats. For owner Alisa Ferrari, the move is coming at the right time.



“Our old space wasn’t conducive to being a restaurant anymore,” she said.

Matteo Ferrari, a northern Italian from the Piedmont region, worked for 14 years on Princess Cruises as a sous chef. Alisa Ferrari was a passenger, the two met, fell in love, he came to visit her in the Bay Area and never left.

Soon after, the two started a catering business called Matteo In Your Kitchen and he was teaching classes at Whole Foods in San Mateo how to make pasta. Over time, he would receive compliments about the food and questions to where his restaurant is located, of course there was none, Alisa Ferrari said.

“We were catering food out of our home,” Alisa Ferrari added.

In 2001, shortly after the dot-com crash, Alisa Ferrari was tired of her job and she looked online for restaurants that were for sale. One of them was the Alpine Inn on Primrose Road.

“We ended up buying the Alpine Inn and opened in May of 2004,” Alisa Ferrari said.

She remembered saying to Matteo that they just needed to make it to the end of the lease and see how it goes from there. Though no longer a couple, Alisa Ferrari said their relationship as friends and business partners remains strong.

Stained glass



The Alpine Inn was a Swiss and German restaurant owned by a husband and wife from the Swiss Alps. Matteo was just from the other side of the mountain, Alisa Ferrari said. A customer made the original owners a stained glass of a mountain with a flower in the middle. The flower is known as an Edelweiss in German or in Italian it's called the Stella Alpina which grows in the Alps.

“When we peeling the wallpaper off of the walls of the old place we were trying to figure out what’s going to be our name, what’s our menu, everything,” Alisa Ferrari said. “And to pay homage to the old place, Matteo looked at the stained glass and said how about calling it Stella Alpina Osteria.”

While Stella outgrew its humble beginnings, Alisa and Matteo Ferrari brought the stained glass window to the new location as a reminder of how far they have come. She wants to stay true to those roots that made Stella a dinner destination with which the community fell in love.

“The vision that Matteo and I had was every night we are having a dinner party and we are welcoming guests into our home,” Alisa Ferrari said. “And it’s a culture I have developed and I want to always keep it that way.”

Stella has become a fixture in the community, Alisa Ferrari added, and the restaurant grew up with the community.

“I see kids coming in now as adults that I have known since they were little children,” Alisa Ferrari said.

The new space takes the place of Sixto’s Cantina and originally it was a tavern called the Bit of England which possessed the first liquor license in the city after Prohibition, Alisa Ferrari said. The restaurant is connected to the business next door which was previously a nail salon. But the building’s complete makeover is all in the details, Alisa Ferrari said, from the star stencils on the tiled floor, down to the Vegas-style bathrooms.

In general, the menu reflects where Matteo has come from as most of the meals offered are items he cooked with his Nonna Nilla, or grandmother Nilla, in Italy. Growing up, Sunday afternoons were reserved for Nonna Nilla where she would pass down the art of making potato gnocchi and mastering the perfect sauce. His 

formative years spent with his family is where he developed a love and passion for cooking. As a teen, he enrolled in culinary school which he paid for by selling foraged mushrooms he collected and fish he caught to the local restaurants, according to Stella's website.

Specialties

The menu features the rich flavors of braised meats that are authentic to the famous culinary region of Piedmont. One example is his specialty dish osso buco di vitello, a braised veal shank with mascarpone polenta, for \$40. Another one of his favorite dishes to cook is the pollo alla "cacciatora" con polenta, for \$32. It comes with a boneless chicken leg and thigh braised with mushrooms, root vegetables, kalamata olives, white wine, tomato and garlic.

While Alisa Ferrari laughs that Matteo said he is not a spaghetti and meatball restaurant, they offered a spaghetti and meatball dish during COVID and it became so popular they couldn't take it off the menu. The gnocchi di patate "Nonna Nilla" is a dish named after his grandmother. The \$25 dish comes with homemade gnocchi, Italian sausage, porcini ragu or walnut and gorgonzola. Alisa said they try to offer a variety of options for all kinds of diets. The menu offers an eggplant parmesan for this exact reason.

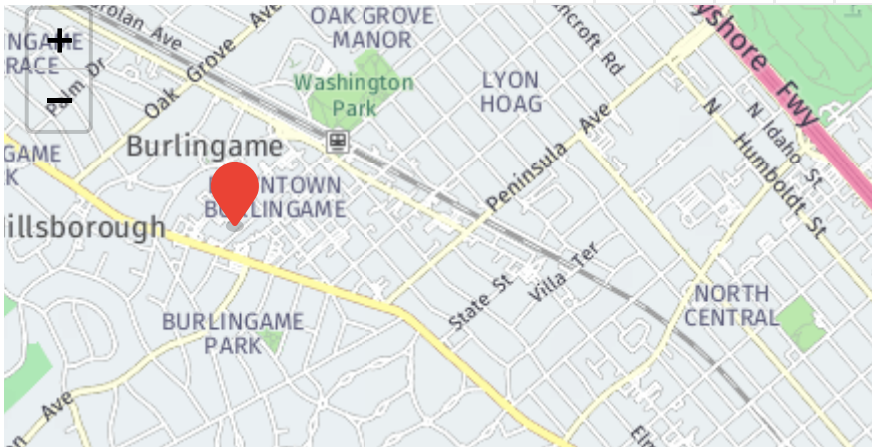
"I wanted a vegetarian option that wasn't pasta," Alisa Ferrari said.

The full bar features Italian and California wines. The drink menu offers about six different specialty crafted cocktails including barrel aged negroni and old-fashioned that are made to complement the rest of the menu.

"Eighteen years later, our last day was on Valentine's Day and I was crying all day reflecting on all the memories," Alisa Ferrari said. "This business is a grind day in and day out and you have to love it and you have to be crazy."

For now the restaurant is open seven days a week from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. Visit stellaburlingame.com for reservations or call (650) 347-5733.

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Nicholas Mazzoni covers the cities of Burlingame, Millbrae, South San Francisco, San Bruno, water use and housing.

