

Mystery Meat 8: Vitale's Vignetta



Italian opera is tuned at the perfect pitch to exude atmosphere without requiring diners to scream over Puccini in order to compliment a plate of pasta primavera. The burgundy tablecloths and Sicilian vineyard prints add an air of modest elegance to Vitale's Italian Cuisine.

I was there to meet my client, Raymond Brawn, with whom I was having an ill-advised affair. Mixing business with pleasure had proved unwise and my days were spent hunting down the Fox Valley Butcher on his dime while my nights were wrapped in the spider arms of a restaurant investor who was proving to be as elusive as the madman killing local chefs, servers, and dishwashers.

"What is your pleasure, my dear?" Brawn asked, running his fingers along a pencil-thin moustache.

My dark blue silk suit and sturdy pumps were subtle compared to his garish attire. He wore a scarlet brocade smoking jacket with gabardine pants and spats. The only thing missing from his get-up was an ivory pipe and a parrot on his shoulder.

"Whatever you order will be divine, my darling," I said, raising a suspicious eyebrow.

Brawn summoned our waiter, "We'll begin with mozzarella logs, hot garlic bread, and deep-fried artichoke hearts."

The appetizers were subconsciously symbolic. The lead suspect in the Fox Valley murders was a fellow called The Logger. As I stretched a warm string of cheese into a jump rope between my lips and fingertips, I thought of the strange coincidences in this case. Every time a body showed up, a lone axe-wielding lumberjack was coming or going from the crime scene. I took a bite of warm bread tangy with garlic. The one person who knew the logger was a spicy little waitress named Betty. As for the deep-fried artichoke hearts, something told me Brawn's love was less than genuine.

Our raucous banter had been replaced by polite pleasantries, a sure sign the relationship was poisoned with the sort of secrets requiring a measure of decorum. Teasing and flirtation had been tempered by a frosty chivalry.

Brawn opened the menu, “Their classic cacciatore is enticing. Lightly sautéed mushrooms, green peppers, onions, and chicken are bathed in a white wine sauce and served over a bed of pasta. Would you like that?”

“To be bathed in white wine and served over a bed of pasta? I think I might like that. I’ll have the spinach rotolo. Two wheels of pasta, ricotta, parmesan, and spinach lightly browned with a marinara sauce sounds delicious.”

My client had grown tedious with his timetables and complaints. His pressuring to solve the case graduated from hints to rants to bellyaching belligerence. A once-dashing suitor was turning into a downright drag.

“Don’t you just love Vitale’s?” he asked, his eyes flickering with slight boredom.

“It’s the best Italian around,” I returned sighing heavily.

Vitale’s is one of the most consistently good restaurants in Oshkosh. Their veal scaloppini is tender, their seafood marinara is bountiful, their chicken pomodoro is savory, and their tiramisu is a layered decadence of mascarpone cheese over espresso and Kahlua-soaked ladyfingers sealed in cream and sprinkled with cocoa. The only thing marring the meal was my diner companion. Brawn was a fly in the spumoni.

“More wine, my dear?” he said, lifting the carafe.

“I’ve had all the whining I can stand.”

In 1968, Faro Vitale came to America from Palermo, Sicily, and honed his culinary talents in competitive big city venues like New York and Chicago. His first Wisconsin restaurant was opened in downtown Oshkosh. It was 1980 and Faro’s talent with rustic old world dishes composed of the freshest ingredients quickly cramped the locale with more fans than the intimate dining room could sustain. The current complex at 215 West Murdock features several rooms, a conference area, and a cozy bar where regulars get their favorite cocktail shaken or stirred before settling on a stool.

Chef Lalo continues Vitale’s tradition of excellence by adding signature dishes to the traditional Italian menu. His baked salmon on fettuccini with tender baby clams is a weekly favorite for those with insider information. Deceptively simple tenderloin topped with mushrooms and onions is masterfully prepared. The most straightforward dishes are designed with the sort of artistry befitting a seasoned chef.

Lalo and his wife are the consummate hosts, welcoming diners as if they were family. Both chat tableside and remember how one prefers her steak. Every step of the dining process is attended to from the calamari to the cannoli.

Raymond Brawn made dispassionate small talk about the case. We agreed that the Fox Valley Butcher had to be caught and put away. We agreed to step up surveillance on The Logger. We agreed that buxom Betty the waitress might have more information that she let on.

His eyes cut across the room and widened lasciviously. Apparently his dream girl had entered the dining room. As much as he was beginning to bore me, I didn't like the idea of turning him over to another tomato too quickly.

He licked his lips and continued to stare. I removed a compact from my purse and pretended to powder my nose as I angled the mirror to check out my competition. What manner of exotic femme fatale could steal his gaze? Another Puccini opera began to loop in the background as I looked for a magnetic singer in the spirit of Tosca or flirtatious seamstress like Mimi from La boheme. The corner of the room was empty except for a steaming hot plate of Vitale's baked tortellini.