

Mona Lisa Restaurant & Pizzeria

8465 Holcomb Bridge Road, Johns Creek, 678-822-6662

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Mona Lisa knows the perfect balance of casual Italian. It's the kind of place you'd feel equally comfortable buddying up to pizza and an icy beer or a discerning pasta dish and a glass of fine wine. It's pleasant, comfortable and relaxed, but don't underestimate the kitchen.

DINNER-AND-A-MOVIE LINE

While waiting for food, you can catch sports on the TV at the bar. But we opt for an impromptu game of movie trivia, courtesy of the scores of film dialogue hand-painted on Mona Lisa's green walls. As the cooks sling and swirl pizza dough in the air in the open kitchen, we try to peg each line to the appropriate movie. "Have you ever danced with the devil in the pale moonlight?" comes from Jack Nicholson's Joker in "Batman" and, of course, "Are you talkin' to me?" will forever be linked to "Taxi Driver." Several stumpers make for a fun and challenging premeal distraction. But all attention goes to the food as it arrives.

AMAZING MUSSELS AND OTHER APPETIZERS

Fans of shellfish owe it to themselves to experience Mona Lisa's dazzling Mussels Fra Diavolo. A fantastic, garlicky white wine and tomato sauce with a tinge of spice covers a bowl loaded with open-shell mussels. Owner Sal Mangino keeps a close eye on the dish and its remarkable sauce, which causes us to dunk hunks of homemade focaccia into the remaining puddle for good measure.

Sizable fried calamari pop with freshness, and a collection of salads serve as admirable precursors to the main course. The Greek comes as you'd expect, with a scattering of feta cheese, kalamata olives and more. And its spring chicken salad is a fruity affair with marinated



Phil Skinner/AJC

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Chicken Scarpiello features sliced chicken breast, roasted potatoes, sausage, roasted red peppers, garlic and more sautéed in a rosemary white wine sauce.

chicken breast mixed with mandarin oranges, cranberries and toasted almonds.

PIZZA WITH PIZAZZ

Mona Lisa scores big with its specialty pies, especially the Mona's Garden. This white pizza gets dressed with thin slivers of roasted almonds and smart amounts of mushrooms and spinach. An underlying garlic accent brings a nice tone. The signature pizzas stay inventive throughout the menu, including the Morris Park, a white pizza starring Gorgonzola cheese, red onion and grilled chicken, and the Number 4, a quartet of mozzarella, ricotta, provolone and Parmesan cheeses.

DRESSING UP ENTREES

Next time, we hope to discover interesting entrees such as the Veal Saltimbocca, a house specialty version of veal scaloppine dolled up with prosciutto, 'shrooms, sage and mozzarella cheese basking in a combination of white wine and brown sauce. A roster of pastas includes time-honored ravioli, linguine and rigatoni. Goat cheese helps flavor the farfalle pomodoro. The restaurant offers a host of pasta specials during the week and typically adds seafood specials on the weekend.

Mona Lisa's smiley, attentive service and thoughtful fare gives reason for a repeat visit. The care translates into the food as Mangino whips up the tomato sauce, pizza dough, pizza sauce and desserts himself. Be it a family free-for-all feast or a romantic "Lady and the Tramp"-like interlude over noodles and chianti, Mona Lisa is the kind of multipurpose Italian you can count on.

- Hours: 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays; 4-9:30 p.m. Sundays.
- Reservations: Yes, for large parties only.
- Recommended dishes: Mussels Fra Diavolo, Mona's Garden pizza, calamari.
- Prices: Appetizers, salads, soups, \$2.50-\$9.50; pasta dishes and entrees, \$9.95-\$15.50; pizza, \$9.95-\$22.95.
- Web site: www.monalisapizzarestaurant.com.
- Verdict: Multipurpose Italian you can count on to be made with care.



Phil Skinner/AJC

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Mussels Fra Diavolo comes drenched in a garlicky, rich red sauce made by proprietor Sal Mangino.



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While Mona Lisa herself won't be waiting on you, she'd like you to know selections of pasta and wine are available.