

# FINE LIVING

## Ask the Chef: Bella Ciao offers choice ingredients, seasonal Italian cuisine

BY PAMELA A. ZINKOSKY  
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Bella Ciao owner Jim Macdonald knows how to ensure that only the best ingredients go into his restaurant's cuisine: get them fresh and cook with what's in season.

Macdonald often scouts out produce at the Farmer's Market.

"Jim likes to use the best ingredients – organic if possible," said chef Jade York, who's been a chef for 11 years and joined Bella Ciao earlier this year. "Our dishes are very simple. We let the ingredients and the seasons run our menu."

"Jim's company, Pastabilities, makes all the pasta fresh, and it's a big difference from dried pasta," he said. "We bake our bread fresh daily, and all our cheeses and prosciutto are imported from Italy."

York reworks the menu monthly in accordance with what's in season. "We change about half of the menu every month," said York. "Some things stay, others rotate out. It keeps things fresh."

Unlike some Italian restaurants, Bella Ciao's menu is not dominated by pasta, said York.

"We're not a red-sauce pasta restaurant; we're more like a restaurant you'd actually see in Italy," he said, explaining that Italian cuisine most often uses pastas as appetizers or side dishes, with meat, fish and game as entrées.

For example, Bella Ciao's popular potato gnocchi – "the Italian version of macaroni and cheese" said York – is on the appetizer menu, with entrées including a fresh fish of the day, marinated flank steak, duck breast and roasted chicken. One exception is the popular house-made sausage, which is served over penne pasta.

Vegetarian selections are the only red-sauce pasta entrées, and they include manicotti with grilled vegetables and linguine primavera with seasonal vegetables.

**On the crowd:** A lot of couples, young and old alike. Plenty of students and alumni. Also a lot of business dinners. "We're definitely geared toward small and large business meetings," said York. There's a second-floor banquet room for 15 to 40 people, with audio visual equipment available.



Jade York, chef at downtown Ann Arbor's Bella Ciao restaurant. ROBERT RAMEY

**Specialty:** Penne tossed with house-made sausage, hot peppers, pungent greens, olive oil and grated Romano cheese. "Lots of people come to us just for that dish."

**What's good right now:** Pumpkin ravioli in a creamy sauce with apples, leeks, fresh herbs and parmesan cheese.

**One thing you'll never see on the menu:** "You'll never see a pasta-dominated menu."

**Most popular dish:** Beef tenderloin with brandy, shallots and imported gorgonzola cheese. Served with roasted garlic mashed potatoes from the local farmer's market.

**Recommended dessert:** Tiramisu or white chocolate strawberry cake. Look for more desserts in the future, as Bella Ciao plans to hire a pastry chef.

**To impress a client:** Get the full flavor of the menu, said York. Order some Italian wines, a couple of appetizers – York suggests the potato gnocchi and the imported Italian Parma prosciutto with melon – salads and some of the favorite entrées. The veal chops with mushrooms are a favorite among the business crowd.

### The restaurant

#### Bella Ciao

118 W. Liberty St. Ann Arbor (734) 995-2107



**Executive chef:** Jade York  
**Food style:** Italian, with an eastern European influence.

**Wine list:** Extensive, with hundreds of wines from all regions of Italy, plus some American selections, including a few Michigan wines.

**Ambience:** Intimate, calming and romantic – "one of the most romantic restaurants in southeast Michigan," said York. Elegant without being pretentious.

**Hours:** Monday through Saturday 5:30 – 10 p.m., Sunday 5 – 9 p.m.

**Web site:** www.bellaciao.com.

**Parking:** Available in nearby structures and on the street.

**Reservations:** Available by phone.

**Seats:** 55.

**Cost:** \$16-\$29 per entrée.

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