

LA PERLA: A LABOR OF LOVE

My sister and I walked into the sparkling new **La Perla** restaurant on Pennsylvania Avenue the other night for dinner. "Wow," she gasped, "Check out the glasswork! I'll bet you its Murano." As a self-described glass art freak, she was right. Every single piece of Murano Italian glass was specially commissioned for La Perla and lit up the room: expansive chandeliers, accented with turquoise droplets and tulip-like glass flowers, and sconces on the walls throughout. We also admired a Murano fountain, which looked almost like a delicate ice sculpture and bubbled beneath a floor-to-ceiling "Venus on the Half shell" painted on wall tiling. Everything was designed by Owner/Chef **Vittorio Testa**, who made "Venus on the Half Shell" his restaurant's logo, and claims he loves women so much that most of the restaurant was designed to showcase that passion.

"You can tell how much I love the women," he said, "by just going in the women's bathroom. Have you seen it? It is HUGE!"

Now keep in mind, Chef Testa is not only a chef and owner of a new restaurant, but a man who really seems to love every minute of his job. He visits every table and personally welcomes them to his place, chatting about their dinner and assuring everything is perfect. His stories and anecdotes are a special bonus, and you can hear his hearty laugh and lilting Italian accent through out the restaurant. I think he could best be described as a character, with a great sense of humor and a twinkle in his eye that makes you wonder if he's telling you a tall tale. Nonetheless, he considers each diner his personal, special guest, and he has the credentials to back up his stories.

"I treat my restaurants like my home, and I want people to feel welcome here," he said. "If it's not good enough for me, it's not good enough for my guests, and I only want the best. I treat everyone like family."

Chef Testa has spent more than 20 years in D.C., and told me La Perla is his last and most special monument to the city. Previous endeavors include *Ristorante Il Borgo* in McClean, Virginia, and the *Mona Lisa* in Georgetown Harbor. But a restaurant like La Perla, which offers a wide selection of Italian specialties with his own personal touch, has been a lifelong dream for the Italian native. No cheap decorations or red-checked tablecloths will be found here: The treasures he has collected from all over the world are sprinkled throughout the restaurant, and he



can tell you a story for each of them. He pointed to a painting above us the minute he dropped by our table.

"You know who that is, don't you?" he asked with a sly smile. "The Master: Anthony Quinn."

Sure enough, a self-portrait of the late Italian Oscar winner that takes up an entire wall. Quinn stands with his arms outstretched, welcoming you with that famous smile. "It is the only portrait he ever did of himself, and I am proud to have it because he was a good friend of mine," he said.

One can only imagine the people Chef Testa has met during his extensive world travels. Early in his career, he spent more than 20 years as a food inspector on cruise lines throughout Europe and especially Italy, and gained a love and a flair for cooking. He also developed a love for the sea that he, not surprisingly, compares to a woman. He pointed to his Venus and explained.

"Look at the body, look at the beauty, flowing, just like the sea," he paused, for dramatic effect, then whispered, "No woman, no star."

All his innocent flirtations aside, Chef Testa knows how to design a menu, and La Perla's is extensive. The dinner menu features 13 homemade pastas, 11 seafood creations, and 20 meat/poultry choices. The lunch menu is pared down a bit, but is still more than you'll find at other Pennsylvania Avenue spots. Expect to spend from \$4.75 to \$13.50 for

lunch selections; dinner ranges from \$17 to \$37 per entree. Portions are large, so get ready to ask for a doggy bag, unless you have a hearty appetite. Their wine list is extensive as well, and focuses on value as well as quality.

For special events, La Perla has a homey, elegant dining room that seats up to 20 guests. With its long, dark wood table and china cabinet, it feels like someone's home dining room. And, when you look inside the china cabinet at the gleaming collections inside, you realize it is someone's home dining room: Chef Testa's. Italian china, Venetian vases, and more Murano are throughout the room, displayed openly and making you wonder why they aren't under lock and key.

La Perla wants everyone to enjoy their offerings, and does something special for the college crowd. Every Monday through Friday, from 3:30 to 5:30 p.m., students with identification can enjoy a choice of appetizer, entree, and unlimited non-alcoholic drinks for only \$13 (tax and gratuity not included). Reservations are now being accepted for Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve dinner. Once word gets out about this newly opened restaurant, you will definitely want to call before you go.

La Perla, 2600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW Phone: 202-333-1767 www.laperlaofwashington.com. Lunch: Monday-Friday, 11 a.m. - 3:30 p.m. Dinner: 3:30 p.m. - 11:30 p.m.