

# La Strada Italiano 'Fell Into Her Lap'

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Staff Writer

La Strada Italiano looks as though it belongs in New York's Little Italy, with its red-and-white-checked tablecloths, French doors that open to the street and authentic food and wine. But instead, it is one of Belmont Shore's hot spots.

Owner Lisa Ramelow says the restaurant originally started as Café La Strada when her father opened it with a partner 16 years ago. But the business deal soured, and the restaurant "fell into my lap," Ramelow said.

"My father always said it was the biggest mistake of his life, but I always tell him that his biggest mistake ended up being the best thing that ever happened to me," she said.

When it opened, Ramelow was working at Rockwell International in Downey as a software engineer. She was on maternity leave and wanted to spend more time with her children. With her minimal restaurant experience, Ramelow took over the business and learned to manage it on her own, which she says is one of her biggest accomplishments.

"I worked at a coffee shop when I was 16 years old, but they fired me because I ate a whole box of mints," she said.

Now, "Café" is gone from the name, and La Strada Italiano at 4716 E. 2nd St. is a favorite among locals.

"Café La Strada was often mistaken for a coffee shop that served croissants. No one knew we had Italian food," she said.

Although she is not Italian and does not cook, Ramelow provides customers with authentic and fresh meals. The chefs create dishes, which are put on the menu as "specials." If the food is popular enough, it becomes a permanent item on the menu, which spans from traditional spaghetti and meatballs to more complex dishes like stuffed chicken with a spicy tomato sauce, she said.

Ramelow strives to make her customers' and workers' experiences at La Strada positive and personal. After meeting with a restaurant consultant who told Ramelow to show more of herself in the restaurant, she put a photo of her mother on the menu cover and filled the bistro-style room with family photos.

Customers appreciate knowing her history and the history of the restaurant, and she is proud of the atmosphere she has created.

"I love the feeling of 'family' I get to have here every night," she said.



La Strada Italiano owner Lisa Ramelow holds a menu with her mother's photo on the cover. Opened by her father in the mid 1990s, she took over the restaurant after a business deal between him and his partner soured. Located at 4716 E. 2nd St. in Belmont Shore, La Strada Italiano is open every day for lunch and dinner. For more information, call 562/433-8100 or visit: [www.lastradaon2nd.com](http://www.lastradaon2nd.com). (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

"All of my regular customers, I feel funny calling them customers. They are more like my friends."

One of Ramelow's major tasks is marketing for La Strada, which she does completely on her own. She volunteers at community events, and is a member of the Belmont Shore Business Association. La Strada has its own Facebook profile, Web site and blog.

La Strada Italiano recently celebrated its 8th Annual Customer Appreciation Party and offers a Tuesday special, with a \$5 glass of wine and \$5 appetizers.

"By doing all these things, I think everybody wants to be here, the customers and employees. No one feels like they have to be here," she said.

Another major project Ramelow spearheaded was the Pinup Girls of La Strada 2010 calendar. It started as a fundraising campaign for pancreatic cancer after one of her regular patrons, and father of one of her employees, died from the disease.

Some calendars were purchased, but there were extras and Ramelow found a very fulfilling way to get them off her hands, she said.

After looking at [www.anysoldier.com](http://www.anysoldier.com), she decided to send 1,000 calendars to soldiers overseas who want to know that they're not forgotten.

Some calendar recipients wrote thank-you letters, and one group of servicemen parodied the photos, she said. Two have returned to La

Strada to say "thank you" in person, and she expects a group from Camp Pendelton at the end of June.

For Ramelow, knowing that she has helped someone and made a difference in their life, is personally fulfilling, she said.

Financially, the restaurant has its ups and downs, but that's not the most important thing for Ramelow.

Feeling responsible for her 15 employees, Ramelow said her biggest challenge this year has been keeping La Strada's doors open. Because of the economic circumstances, she works between 70 and 80 hours each week but has not cashed any of her own paychecks.

"I really love my job; I love being here. I've met so many wonderful people in the community," she said. ■