

Dal Grano review: The fresh new face of pasta in McLean

By **Tim Carman** April 14

Ana Gomez, the woman working the pasta extruder at Dal Grano in McLean, has a relaxed air about her as the machine squeezes out pale-yellow ropes of bucatini. She glides a flat tool across the extruder's bronze die to free the hollowed-out strands, so she can build a small nest with them on a baking sheet. By the time Gomez sprinkles semolina flour over the nest, the mechanical pastemaker has already spat out more doughy lengths to cut and form.

This interplay between Gomez and machine is fluid, practiced and as expressive as a [Charlie Chaplin pantomime](#). So what exactly is being communicated by this daily ritual? Dal Grano owner Jozef Valko can give you the top-level takeaway:

"I don't have any dried pasta besides the gluten-free one," he says, matter-of-factly.

You read right. The crew at Dal Grano, a strip-center pasta house, makes every length of spaghetti, every elbow of macaroni and every ribbon of pappardelle in-house. Between them, Gomez and Valko produce about a dozen pastas, eight of which can be ordered in four different flavors, including carrot and beet. For those allergic to mental calculations, allow me to do the quick, scratchpad math: Dal Grano cranks out more than 35 varieties of pasta including gnocchi, lasagna sheets, whole-wheat penne, spinach fusilli, stuffed ravioli and squid-ink spaghetti. Many of these beauties display their colors in a glass case by the cash register.

Allow me to flash more numbers: Most of the pasta dishes at Dal Grano run between \$7 and \$14 each, which includes your choice of housemade sauce and an unlimited supply of crisp-and-airy focaccia to sop up the bolognese or carbonara. Did I mention the bread is made here, too?

Which brings me to my own takeaway of the pasta-extruder pantomime: In terms of value — the price paid versus the amount of work required to prepare dinner — I can't think of another Italian restaurant that surpasses the ultra-casual, tangerine-tinted Dal Grano. I mean, these days you can't escape a red-sauce house, where they dump pasta from a box, without dropping 16 bucks or more for a plate of sausage and spaghetti.

The first time I dined at Dal Grano, it was late December, and I looked (and probably smelled) like someone who had been sleeping in his car for a week. I had spent the last few days moving a lifetime of accumulated junk to our new home (or to Value Village) and didn't have time to make myself presentable before the restaurant closed. No one behind the counter batted an eye at my street-dog mien, and I proceeded to wolf down a beef-and-bechamel lasagna whose thin pasta sheets almost melted on the tongue. The only resistance came from a top layer of blackened cheese and sauce, its crustiness a ticklish counterpoint to the lush interior.

At the time, I could have hugged Valko — if, of course, he had allowed me within 10 feet of him.

I've dined at Dal Grano many times since then, and my respect for the kitchen's self-reliance has only grown. Chef Oscar Reyes, a veteran of Il Pizzico in Rockville and Primi Piatti downtown, leads a team that produces not just 30-plus pastas but also a saffron risotto (golden in color, rich with chicken stock and Parmesan, more chewy than creamy), a thick roll of porchetta (crusty, fatty and fragrant with sage and rosemary) and a line of sandwiches, including a caprese served on ciabatta so crackly and light that I did a double take. Of course this bread is also housemade.

"It took me a long time to get the ciabatta right," Valko confides. Look for homemade baguettes in the future.

Valko's scratch approach to Italian cooking is an inherited skill. A native of the former Czechoslovakia, Valko was trained as a mechanical engineer, but like so many immigrants to America, he gravitated toward restaurants once he arrived on U.S. shores in 1990. He started as a pasta maker for Roberto Donna at Galileo, where Valko would eventually become the wine steward overseeing some 1,500 vintages. Valko would later manage Tosca, that white-tablecloth temple of Italian gastronomy, for more than a decade. He

called upon both Cesare Lanfranconi, the former chef at Galileo and Tosca, and Matteo Venini, the current chef at Tosca, when designing and refining Dal Grano's menu.

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Such influential friends cannot solve every issue, though. Like personal biases. Your love for Dal Grano, I suspect, will be only as deep as your affection for fresh pasta. Personally, I sometimes prefer the firm, al dente bite of penne dumped straight from a box. I was reminded of this prejudice as Dal Grano's furrowed tubes surrendered without a fight when paired with a light, garlicky white wine sauce. The spaghetti, a fresh tomato sauce clinging tightly to its strands, offered all the resistance of polenta, blurring the line between pasta and sauce.

The egg pastas tend to play well with others. The spinach pappardelle is a bright, verdant peacock with a shy personality, allowing the meaty, though not saucy, wild boar ragu to dominate the plate. The spinach-and-ricotta-stuffed ravioli are soft, supple pockets that provide just enough bitterness to inject some backbone into an otherwise submissive Parmesan cream sauce. Sometimes I think even the freshly extruded pastas can hold their own, perhaps after they've been rested in the walk-in long enough to give them some tooth; the bucatini coiled at the base of my bowl, for example, stood up well to the salty, pancetta-laced carbonara.

Speaking of bowls, the salads, including a crisp-and-vibrant panzanella, are served in wobbly white bowls that do a faceplant on the table whenever you try to spear a vegetable anywhere other than the center of the dish. It is one of those eccentricities that you learn to accept at this hard-working neighborhood eatery.

Another one? An owner from central Europe who stocks Czech beers so, every once in a while, he can crack open a bottle and have a taste of home — right in his Italian pasta shop.

IF YOU GO

Dal Grano

1386 Chain Bridge Rd., McLean, 703-821-6725, dalgrano.com.

Hours: 11:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. Monday-Saturday; noon to 7 p.m. Sunday.

Nearest Metro: McLean, with a 2.4-mile trip to the restaurant.

Prices: \$7 to \$18 for sandwiches, pastas and entrees.

Tim Carman serves as the full-time writer for the Post's Food section and as the \$20 Diner for the Weekend section, a double duty that requires he ingest more calories than a draft horse.

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