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DEFENDING 'DREAMERS'

The owner of Wildflower Bread Co. says DACA recipients are a vital part of Arizona's restaurant industry.

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Dining

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Babbo Italian Eatery opens at Pavilions

Gwen Ashley Walters
Special to Arizona Republic
USA TODAY NETWORK

If you thought Babbo Italian Eatery was a national chain restaurant, you're not alone. But it isn't. It is as local as Upward Projects (Postino, Joyride Taco House, Windsor, Churn) and Fox Restaurant Concepts (Flower Child, Culinary Dropout, The Henry, Arrogant Butcher, among others).

And like other local restaurant groups, it's expanding. Babbo's appeal: Italian comfort food that's affordable and a family-friendly environment.

Babbo's eighth Valley location opened Thursday, April 19, at the Pavilions at Talking Stick near Scottsdale. It's the first Babbo in the area, and it adds to the mix of the shopping center at Loop 101 and Indian Bend Road on the Salt River Reservation.

The family-owned, Phoenix-based chain spans from Queen Creek to Surprise. The original Babbo opened in Glendale in 2002 on a shoestring budget in a 1,900-square-foot space as a BYOB.

Babbo might not impress Italian culinary connoisseurs, but that was never owner Ken Pollack's goal.

"We had no idea that we'd open an-



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Babbo's main dining room at its new Pavilions at Talking Stick location. JOSE MARTINEZ OF FORM DESIGN STUDIO



Bread is baked fresh in-house at Babbo Italian Eatery. BABBO ITALIAN EATERY

Babbo

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other," he said. "A girl popped her head, just as we were opening, and I asked her if she was looking for a job. She was our first hire and she is still working with us 15 years later."

Meatballs to pizza

Babbo focuses on simple, Italian-American comfort food. Think spaghetti and meatballs, pizzas, antipasti and salads. The chain is known for its spaghetti dinner special, offered at \$6.99 on Monday and Tuesday evenings.

Another signature is the focaccia bread, baked in-house several times a day.

"I'm not Italian, but after eight restaurants, I ought to be," Pollack quipped.

Like other restaurants, Babbo got hit by the financial meltdown that began in 2007.

"Back when it felt the world was coming to an end and no one could afford to go out to eat, we offered spaghetti and meatballs for \$5.99. We've only increased the price by a dollar since then," Pollack said.

"It really was a turning point for our restaurants, and we became known as a wallet-friendly place with great service offering Italian comfort food."

More healthy options

Recently, Babbo (which means "daddy" in Italian) has expanded its menu to include grain-and-vegetable-based



Babbo Italian Eatery's private dining room, called the Family Room. JOSE MARTINEZ OF FORM DESIGN STUDIO

protein bowls and other chalkboard specials that are less carb-heavy.

"My doc said I needed to lose weight, so we came up with some options, including the protein bowls, so I could still eat at the restaurant," Pollack laughed.

He has lost 40 pounds and has been able to keep the weight off, and he still eats at one of his restaurants every day.

That doesn't mean he doesn't indulge in the toasted (fried) ravioli with sausage ragu or stuffed manicotti. But now the menu has zoodles (zucchini noodles), kale and other superfood ingredients alongside traditional chicken Alfredo and calzones.

Will more Babbo outlets pop up? Maybe, but for now, Pollack is focused on introducing his sleek new 6,000-square-foot restaurant to another neighborhood in the Valley.

Details: The Pavilions at Talking Stick, 8840 E. Talking Stick Way, Salt River Reservation, near Scottsdale. 480-291-5050, babboitalian.com. Hours: 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Sundays through Thursdays, 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays.