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## FLORIDA WEEKLY CUISINE

Enjoy a taste of Eastern Europe during an evening at Daniela's

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It's hard to say whether Daniela's food tasted so good because of the live violin music that accompanied it or if it was the other way around. Either way, I highly recommend arranging to visit this lovely little restaurant on a night when violinist Oleg Timuta is performing.

Mr. Timuta's broad repertoire includes selections as diverse as "Hello Dolly," "Yesterday," "My Way" and a fascinating number called "Skylark," in which he uses his instrument to mimic the sounds of a skylark, a chicken, a woodpecker, a cuckoo and a cow. Really.

He doesn't have to stroll too much, since the dining room is fairly small and he's relatively close to just about all of the tables when he stands near the long bar along a side wall.

Meanwhile, Chef Daniela and her accommodating family make sure that everyone is well served.

The Transylvanian platter presents cabbage rolls, hand-rolled sausages, chicken paprikash with spaetzle, polenta and vegetables.

The menu offers Romanian, Hungarian and Italian items, which might seem an unlikely combination, but the kitchen has managed to create a harmonious balance of the three cuisines. Whether it's Hungarian goulash, lush ravioli or savory sausage, it's all made from scratch on the premises.

Considering how readily available packaged pasta and readymade sausages are — and how ubiquitous is their use — it's that much more impressive that a small establishment such as Daniela's would go to the trouble of making its own. The result, however, is a meal as comforting and heartwarming as those my grandmother used to make.

Clearly, Chef Daniela has incorporated her family's recipes into the mix, starting with salata de vinete, otherwise known as Mom's delicious eggplant spreadada (\$6.50). Smooth and lightly seasoned so as not to overpower the eggplant, it's delicious, indeed, scooped up with pieces of freshly baked bread.

Homemade spinach ravioli are filled with pumpkin, ricotta and



Parmesan and finished with a light béchamel sauce.

The chiftelute, traditional Romanian meatballs (\$6.95), consisted of small meatballs served with pickles. Although it doesn't seem like a natural combination, they went together beautifully, the cool crispness of the pickles complementing the soft, chewy meatballs.

My least favorite appetizer was the tonno fagioli cipolla (\$7.50), a mix of tuna, beans and onions that lacked the depth of flavor the other two starters possessed. Next time I'm going to try the goulash.

Although Eastern Europe has a reputation for being meat-centric, vegetarians have several options here, including the capallacci verde alla zucca (\$15), delicate pillows filled with pumpkin, ricotta and Parmesan topped with a light béchamel sauce. This dish showcased the chef's ability to meld subtle flavors to achieve a rich, unified whole.

Tuna, beans and onions form a salad of sorts that lends an Italian flavor to Daniela's menu. KAREN FELDMAN / FLORIDA WEEKLY

Two of us shared the whimsically named Transylvania platter (\$36.95 for two), which contained a trio of house specialties: sarmale, old-fashioned cabbage rolls stuffed with meat and rice; mititei, Romanian-style hand-rolled sausages; and csirke paprikas, the classic Hungarian chicken stew. The assorted items were served on a large platter that also held slices of polenta dressed in yogurt, delicate spaetzle and a mix of zucchini, eggplant and onions. The sausage — a blend of beef, pork and lamb — was lightly seasoned and fine on its own or with a dip into the pool of mustard served with it. This is an ideal entrée for those who want an introduction to Eastern European cuisine.

Our young server — the teen-aged daughter of the chef — proudly touted her mother's tiramisu and chocolate mousse for dessert. We tried one of each and agreed that they were both excellent, the tiramisu light and fluffy with a thin coating of cocoa on top, the mousse rich with a dense chocolate flavor.

The wine list is relatively small, and those who choose the meatier fare from the menu might do better with a beer, but we gamely ordered a Romanian wine, a 2008 Tohaner Special Reserve Merlot. It was relatively light in body and flavor, with a touch of currants mingling with earthy tannins.

Service was as homey as the food. The daughter of the chef provided most of it and was engaging as well as knowledgeable about the menu. She was justifiably proud of her mother's offerings and adept at offering suggestions.

And then there was the music. Mr. Timuta is clearly an experienced violinist who understands music as well as the audiences for which he plays. He gave us a varivariety of old and new and, although his online resume shows extensive concert experience, he obviously knew that in a restaurant



people would want to talk and he didn't try to compete with that.

The dining room, with its sturdy wood bar and chairs, tables draped with white over nectarine tablecloths, seemed to have been lifted out of a small town in Romania and deposited whole in North Naples (in the same shopping center as Noodle Saigon). Add the music and it's easy to imagine that you've landed in Eastern Europe in the home of a welcoming and culinarily talented family.

Daniela's is rich in Old World charm and food that has stood the test of time. There's nothing glitzy or trendy here — just wellcrafted food served by people who understand the meaning of hospitality. |

