Iron Mountain *ITALIAN*

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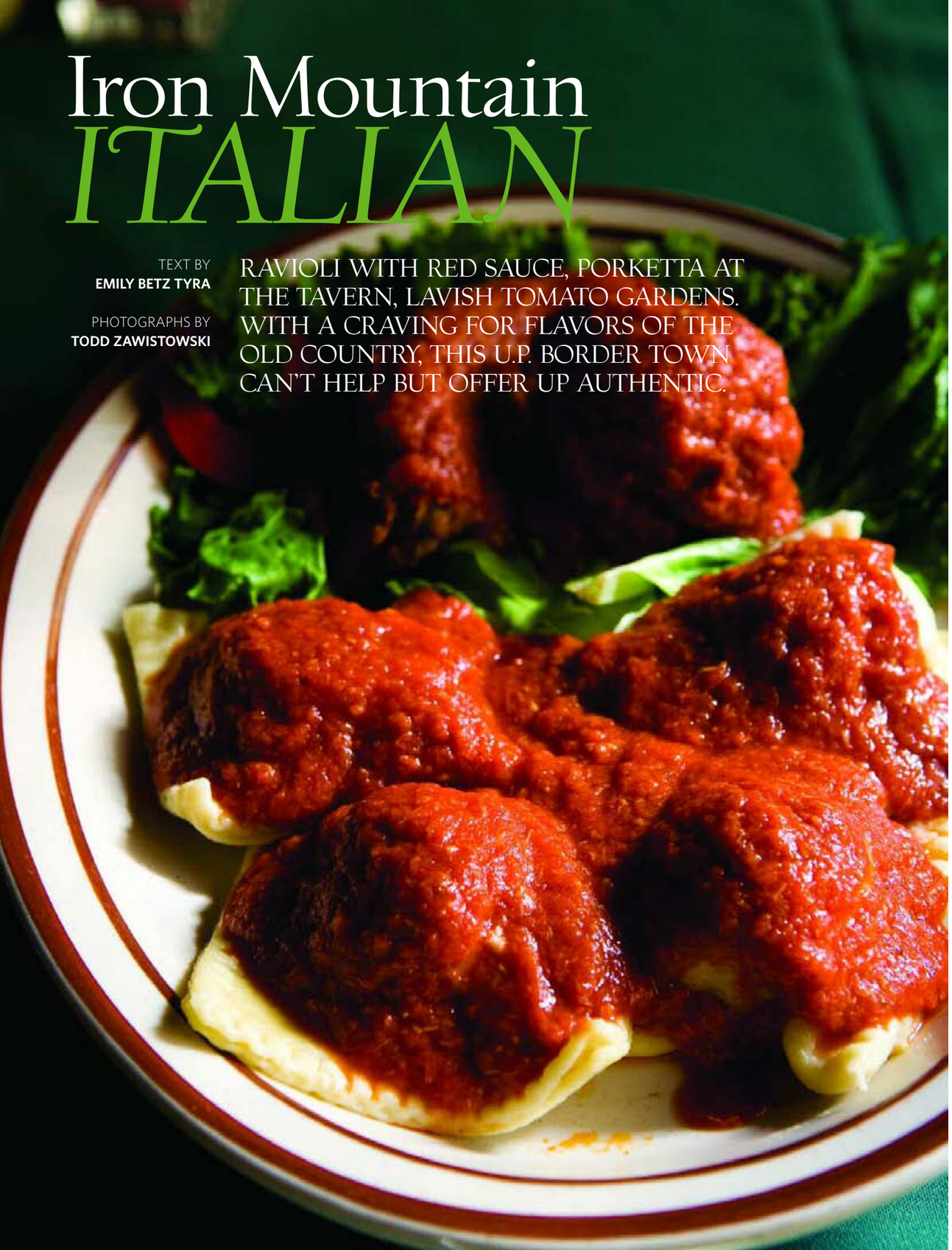
RAVIOLI WITH RED SAUCE, PORKETTA AT THE TAVERN, LAVISH TOMATO GARDENS. WITH A CRAVING FOR FLAVORS OF THE OLD COUNTRY, THIS U.P. BORDER TOWN CAN'T HELP BUT OFFER UP AUTHENTIC.



We're headed to the western edge of the Upper Peninsula, to a far-away land of tremendous pines, abandoned mines and abundant Italian food. My husband and I glimpse the sign through the hot summer rain and know we've arrived: *Welcome to Iron Mountain, Proud Hometown of Tom Izzo and Steve Mariucci*. The famed MSU basketball and Detroit Lions coaches were first graders together at the Immaculate Conception school on the Northside, where the Italians in this working-class town settled. Iron Mountain is so close to Wisconsin, we have to turn back our watches to Central Time so we're on time for dinner at Fontana's Supper Club.

The deluge drenches our necks as we run along Fontana's windowless stone exterior to find the door. The first door opens to the kitchen—a quick waft of spice and the glint of pots—the next is locked, the third is just right. We're ushered through the wood foyer into a traditional cocktail lounge with upholstered half-moon booths and a wine cellar. Photos of Izzo and Mariucci are framed like family portraits on the walls. We slip into the supper club code of behavior: drinks in the lounge, place your dinner order with your cocktail waitress. When the hostess seats you, salad and warm garlic bread are already waiting at the tall, wood-backed booth. Each is its own little island, with a personal dimmer switch above the shaker of Parmesan. We set our mood to warm glow.

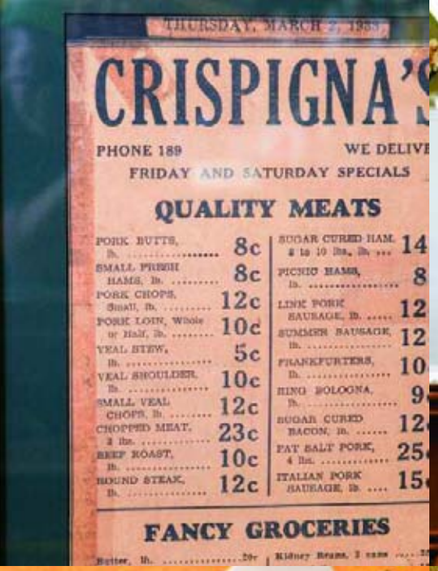
The wine is poured in graceful, tall goblets, and we watch as platters of trout, porterhouse and ravioli go by. The waitress arrives at our table and says, "There you gooo," with the sing-songy vowels of an entrenched Yooper accent.

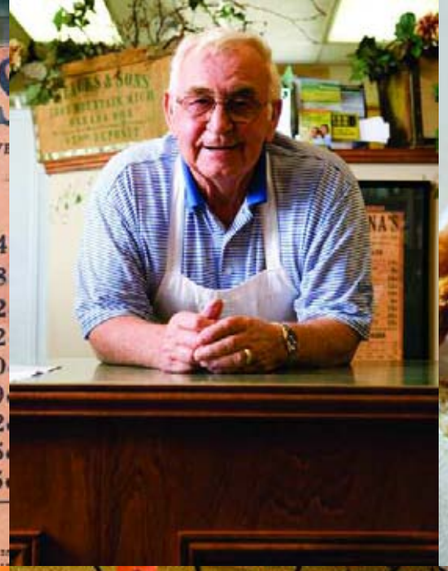
We have hand-cut steaks, soft bread with a glossy crust, cords of tender homemade linguini with secretly prepared clam sauce. It's rich with mushrooms and garlic that was sautéed only until just golden. But first, a moment for Fontana's meatballs in a lusty red sauce, or what's known in Iron Mountain as *sugo* or gravy: tomato is the star, but it's not the only note—each bite is like a full orchestra. The slow-cooked sauce is not salty and not overly herbal, it's nuanced and deep and coats the meatball. This is a sauce that, even though it's made in a kitchen on the edge of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, comes straight from Italy.

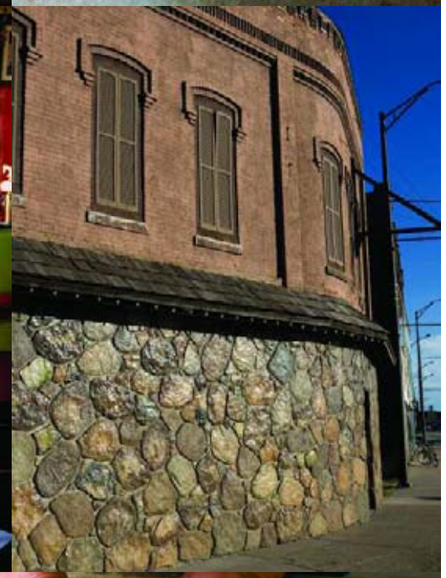
The Italians that inhabit the Northside of Iron Mountain come mostly from the same three pockets of Italy: Piedmont, Marche and Abruzzi. Their parents were skilled marble miners, and many were poor, with children who overflowed the house and slept under the olive trees. All came for work when iron was found in the Menominee range here in 1879. By 1910, there were 1,457 Italians living in Dickenson County, most working in Iron Mountain's mines, the Chapin, the Hamilton and the Millie. Neighborhoods sprung up around the mineshafts—the Italians settled the Northside, casting wine presses into the cement basements of their trim homes, planting giant vegetable gardens and two or three fruit trees in every backyard. Many families never left, and you'll see their Italian influence all over town: in the park's bocce courts, Izzo's Shoe Hospital, Simone Insurance, Rocconi Ace Hardware, Crispigna's Market and restaurants like Fontana's and Romagnoli's.

MOUNTAIN FOOD

ABOVE: The namesake wine press adorns the roof at Bimbo's Wine Press (*L'vino Torchio*) **OPPOSITE:** Crispigna's plump, homemade cheese tortellini star in this fresh dish with pesto and peas. **PREVIOUS PAGES:** The ravioli at Fontana's Supper Club, with Iron Mountain's trademark smooth, slow-cooked and strained red sauce, or "gravy." Ted Kleikamp, a neighbor in Iron Mountain's Italian Northside, is the lone German at the morning coffee klatch at Bimbo's Wine Press. The tavern's spirit of welcome honors the late Bimbo Constantini, a renowned cook and beloved friend to all on the Northside. Constantini is pictured (CENTER) in the portrait painted on a window shade in the background.







COLORE LOCALE

LEFT TO RIGHT, TOP: A grocery store for Italian cooks in Iron Mountain since the 1920's, Crispigna's is now a gourmet market sourcing Italian meats like prosciutto and sopressa. Philly Crispigna presides over the sauce-, sausage- and ravioli-making. The spicy, fall-apart-tender porketta sandwich at Bimbo's. **MIDDLE:** Deb Constantini slow roasts the porketta in the basement oven at Bimbo's. The decor at Bimbo's is an homage to Michigan sports teams and the Italian flag. Fontana's Supper Club. **BOTTOM:** The cooks at Fontana's Supper Club craft ravioli the Old World way, handrolling thin sheets of pasta, dotting one side with balls of meat or cheese, then flipping a top layer of pasta over the row before pressing and cutting the ravioli.

By the time we leave Fontana's, the rain has stopped. A tiny brown bat out for a mosquito supper swoops down and dances between us for a moment, a renegade member of one of the Midwest's largest congregations of bats, which winters in the deserted Millie mine near the Northside. The abandoned Chapin mineshaft is less hospitable: it collapsed in 1940, taking U.S. 2, cars and all, down with it. An oblong lake the locals call The Pit marks the spot, and most Northside Italians believe it marks an invisible boundary between the Northside and rest of town. "It was as though the other side of town was afraid to cross over here," says Buzzy Olivanti, a first generation Italian who bartends at Bimbo's on the Northside. And so, self sustained and sequestered, the Italian Northside was ripe for customs and family secrets to be handed down exactly as they were in the old country.

Enter through the bright red door of Bimbo's Wine Press (L'Vino Torchio), at the early hour of 10 a.m., and you can't miss the table of men—first- and second-generation Italians—holding an unofficial meeting of the Paisano Club. Buzzy Olivanti is the president.

Buzzy's grandfather worked in the mines, and his dad August (known as Chocolate) worked for the nearby Ford plant making wood paneling for station wagons before opening his own tavern on Merritt Street. Chocolate and his wife Julia served fish fry there with gnocchi and meat and cheese ravioli on Fridays. Now it is a hair salon where Buzzy's wife works. Blacky Lombardini, who cuts hair at the Italian barbershop next door, is here, as is Freddy Constantini, who wears blue suspenders and a gold cross at his neck. Family legend has it Freddy and his twin brother, Jay, were so tiny when they were born, their mother laid them in a cigar box on the wood stove to keep them warm. He's 87.

The Paisanos' table is under the ornate tin ceiling painted in reds, greens and white. The bar's owner, the late Bimbo Constantini, cherished in Iron Mountain for his kindness and cuisine, was a civics teacher at nearby Kingsford High School. He commissioned a student to raise scaffolding in the tavern and paint the ceiling like his own Sistine Chapel. But even before he bought the bar in 1978, this was the neighborhood tavern, a meeting place for both political parties, the Kingsford labor union and various other unions. There were always big cigars and big talk about the Ford plant and the mines; all among men with names like Torpedo Alessandrini, Fluff Santini, Butterballs "Butts" Alessandrini. But mostly they came for the food.

Bimbo's menu is short enough that it's written in its entirety on a pizza circle above the bar, and all of it is good: boats (a lean meatball-type sausage served with red sauce in a ceramic dish), thin-crust pizza, porketta and Italian hot beef sandwiches.

Bimbo passed away five years ago, but his daughter Deb Constantini, a sharp, poised businesswoman with a bob and a commanding presence, came home to carry on his culinary traditions. During her Iron Mountain childhood, starting three days before Christmas every year, dead rabbits would show up on the Constantini house's front step. The family never knew who brought them, but Bimbo knew what to do with them: slow roast them with Italian seasoning. One hundred people stopped by the Constantini house on Christmas morning, so he roasted venison, too, and served melons with proscuitto, and his wife June's double-crust Abruzzi-style pizza with roasted red peppers, anchovies and olive oil. Later, after the last guest left, they family had a Christmas dinner of meat ravioli and red sauce.

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Here's the secret of traditional Iron Mountain red *sugo*: it's slow-cooked with cheap cuts of meat, like pigs feet and sausage, which are then strained so only the drippings are imbued in the sauce, which is as smooth as gravy.

To go with their red sauce, all of the Paisanos' mothers made homemade pasta.

"In our house it was gnocchi," says Buzzy Olivanti, "and polenta." The corn porridge was poured right from the cooking pot onto immaculately clean wooden boards, on top of the table. The golden polenta spread out in a circle, and the family sat down with their forks and worked their way to the meat and sauce in the middle.

Philly Crispigna's family was—and still is—renowned for ravioli. His parents Oreste and Tomaidi Crispigna ran an Italian grocery store, which today still produces made-on-premises sausages and ravioli (during deer season, they can't make ravioli fast enough for the hunters who come through town). Robert and Pete Mondavi, the California winemakers, frequently stayed at his house in the 40's and 50's. The Mondavis rode trains across the country, dropping carloads of grapes from the Napa and Central Valleys

to Italian immigrant communities in the eastern United States, and Iron Mountain was one of their stops on the way. All the Italians in town waited down at the railroad tracks, pushing Zinfandel and Muscat grapes onto the beds of their pickups and bringing them right to their basements to press. Each family made wine for itself or for the older Italians on the Northside who couldn't make their own anymore. The streets were filled with fruit flies.

At Easter, Philly says, his family had a lamb in the garage, alive. "Dad had people come over and butcher it," he says. "They saved the blood and cooked it into a congealed form and baked it into a pie." Italian cooks did not believe in being wasteful, so on the Saturday before Easter they cooked the head and split it so they could eat it, picking out the brains.

The live lambs in the garage are a thing of the past, but the Italian tradition of porchetta, or porketta as it's come to be known in Iron Mountian, is alive and well. The immigrants brought the tradition of spicy, slow-roasted pork from the Umbria, where a whole pig is seasoned for hours with salt, garlic, pepper and fennel before being cooked for many hours more. Schinderle's Bakery on the Northside now stands empty, but in its day it cranked out pasties, biscotti, pizelle and Italian breads, using its big ovens to roast whole pigs in the traditional style. At least five taverns in town served porketta, sending waiters out with eight-foot pans to carry the whole roasted pigs—their crispy skins gleaming—on foot through the streets and back to the bar to be tucked in a crusty roll.

Today the best porketta in town is at Bimbo's. Deb Constantini says no one does pigs anymore (most places turned to smaller boneless roasts), but she still does a whole hindquarter. She goes down to Bimbo's basement and does it herself with an oven built just for its purpose. No one else is allowed down there while she's seasoning or cooking the pork. She won't even let me down there to see the oven.

She does invite me to eat. The waiter brings us two glasses of beer and two porketta sandwiches, each wrapped in paper napkins on cocktail-sized paper plates. They come with the traditional accompaniments: whole slow-roasted garlic, golden pieces of pork skin and spicy little red peppers. The pork is peppery, spicy and melt-in-your-mouth delicious.

The porketta at Bimbo's is so good we come back that night for pizza. Deb isn't there—she went to Green Bay to shop, but her first cousin, Paula Wiegele, greets us. "Deb told me I can't take you down to the basement," she tells us, smiling but serious. We assure her we're here for pizza, not the family secrets. The thin-crust pizza comes out at 6 p.m. on Fridays. We order the works—sausage, pepperoni, mushrooms and onions—and sit next to the bar so we can talk to Paula.

Like her cousin, Paula is classy, warm and talkative. She shows pictures of her kids—who are at school at Central and Michigan State—and tells us when her son comes home, he says, "Mom, I don't care what you cook, but it's got to be Italian." She reveals a few of her secrets: how she rolls her gnocchi off her palms, and where she gets her beautiful skin and sparkling eyes. "My daughter asks that, too," she says. "I tell her it's the olive oil in the diet.

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HOMEGROWN ITALIAN

OPPOSITE: Drive through the gravelly alleys of Iron Mountain and see secret gardens filled with sunflowers and stakes of tomatoes. Lisa Carubini (PICTURED) and her brother Sandro Carubini will harvest and can 50 quarts of tomatoes on one summer afternoon, according to the system their parents taught them. The Carubinis get seeds from Italy for cabbage, which Lisa boils, fries with garlic and oil and eats on focaccia with sausages. **TOP, FROM LEFT:** Wide fettuccine are the best vehicle for chunky, fresh tomato sauce, or what the Carubini family called *sugo finto*. Sun-warmed tomatoes and fresh basil compose a simple salad served with rustic focaccia.

People ask for seconds like they're at home—Paula answers a call for "another boat," and "two more porkettas with garlic and skins."

TAVERN FARE
ABOVE: Bimbo's famous double boat and a bun.

That seems to be true of all Bimbo's food. People ask for seconds like they're at home—Paula answers a call for "another boat," and "two more porkettas with garlic and skins."

We linger too long—the pizza chef took off her apron already. On the way back to the Super 8, like a perfect cosmic joke, the full harvest moon hits our eyes through the tops of the pines.

Lisa Carubini lives in a crisp white house on Sixth Street, the stoop painted cornflower blue and urns of flowers flanking the front door. Lisa, named after her grandmother Elisa Carubini, who kept kitchen in this very house, is petite and sweet. She's one of the young Italian holdouts on Iron Mountain's Northside, where, as the Italians passed on or moved away during the last two decades, many of the houses have become run down or turned into rental units. She invites me in for lunch.

"Here's my chomboloni that went *puuuuh*," she says, gesturing to one lop-side of a still delicious-looking lemon cake. She blames exhaustion—she was up at 5:30 a.m. canning raspberries. The kitchen table is set with crystal and wine goblets, but first we go out to the garden. Her spaniel Sofia follows us through the garage past a canoe and Lisa's elaborate tomato-canning equipment, to the verdant rows in the backyard. Though the garden and her apple and pear tree take up the better part of the postage stamp–sized yard, she admits that she and her brother Sandro have let it shrink a little since the days her grandparents kept it.

"This was my grandma's," Lisa says, back inside now, pulling a hulking, heavy board from the broom closet. "Her pasta board." She shows me how the pasta dough starts by making a well in the flour. "We had a system—we could crank out about a thousand ravioli in four hours. One would work on the board, one would roll it, one would cut squares. You had to be very organized, with three or four women, usually a neighbor. My mother was really strong. I don't have the hands and the strength, but they'd make their pasta super thin. You could pick it up and see through it." For most of us, even pasta *machines* sound like too much trouble, yet these women rolled their ravioli by hand.

For lunch, there's pasta Bolognese, made with homemade sausage, bruschetta and *bandiana*, a dish from the Marche made with tomatoes, peppers and onions. Lisa hands me a Kraft Parmesan shaker for the pasta, telling me the contents are actually grated from a big block she got from her Italian relatives in Monterossa.

As we talk, she trails her sentences with an unconscious, "Eat, eat, eat."

As we clink our little gold espresso spoons in our coffee cups, she tells me how back in Monterosso they bake lasagna in communal ovens. She loves the family recipe for white lasagna (SEE RECIPE P.77) with sausage, fresh asparagus and *besciamella*.

After the first bite of lemony chomboloni, with its crisp, sugar-speckled crust, I ask her how to make it. "I have recipes," she says, "but they're in my head and my heart." She looks up the chomboloni in her mom's recipe book. Everything's handwritten—mostly in Italian—and she finds an index card that reads, *4 cups of flour, 4 eggs, 1 1/4 cup sugar, 1 cup butter, 1/2 cup milk, 3 1/2 teaspoons baking powder, one lemon and its zest, a teaspoon vanilla.* That's all. "You just know you cream your eggs and sugar," she explains.

Down Sixth Street, sisters Jeanette Moreau and Irene Secinaro, from the Capra family, make their chomboloni with anise. The original recipe called for anise seed, but Jeanette lets herself off the hook a little now by using anise flavoring. The sisters are making chomboloni and homemade pizelle for Irene's grandson's wedding on Drummond Island. Their baby sister, Carol "Coco" Brodie, lives in Marquette now, but at the moment she is down in Iron Mountain for a visit.

Coco tells how every night the sisters helped their dad Carlo take off his boots, and they had a nice glass of dark, cloudy homemade wine ready for him on the corner of the table. And every Sunday her mother—her name was Secondina, but they called her Dina—welcomed all of her children and their spouses and their children to the house for dinner. She made meat ravioli, plus polenta, Italian roast chickens, meatballs. Carlo plucked the dandelion leaves from the back yard for the salad, made with oil and vinegar and hardboiled eggs. "You could bring as many people as you wanted, you never had to let her know ahead of time," Coco says. "It was amazing, really. Where did it come from?"

Coco's husband, Bob, also remembers his mother-in-law's table fondly. "You could bring anyone to Dina's house." He tells about the Thanksgiving when Coco brought him and a friend who was alone in Green Bay. "There was a huge crowd, with extra tables on each end. Big Italian boys, all ready to eat. There's the turkey, the red wine's poured, everything's on the table and everyone's just drooling, but no one is making a move for it. Right in the center of the table, there's this huge open spot, and I'm thinking 'Is this some weird religious thing they have going on here?' All of a sudden they bring the cheese rav and the meat rav, and then everyone began. Dina couldn't have a meal without the meat rav and the cheese rav, even Thanksgiving."

Dina taught her daughter well. Coco has company up this weekend, so she made up a few ravioli ahead: 188 cheese and 144 meat, just to be safe.

It's exactly because of the high standards of good home-Italian cooks like Carubini and the Capra sisters that the Italian restaurants in Iron Mountain thrive. Who goes out for meatballs when you can make better ones at home? Expectation is where quality resides. And because Iron Mountain is a working-class town, diners want to spend little, but expect impeccable flavor, and the flavors that they know.

It's come-as-you-are at Romagnoli's on the Northside, and so the place is filled with beer drinkers in Packers sweatshirts, white-haired couples snug on the same side of their booth, cocktail-dress–frocked 20-somethings on dates, all here for the home-cooked Italian. It's hard to resist Grandfather Tulio's *costatella con sugo*, tender pork baby-back ribs in a well-seasoned sauce, but we dine on a hand-cut, butter-tender beef filet with garlic drawn butter (for a mere $24), with salad and homemade bread—dense and delicious—and gnocchi bathed in a slowly-simmered, slightly tart red sauce.

The next day's sky is gorgeous big blue, so we head to the Crispigna family's yellow-stucco market to pick up a picnic. The market, established in 1924, is owned by second-generation Italians Tony and Patti Savarin. Patti's parents, Philly and Lona Crispigna, still make all the meat ravioli and cheese ravioli by hand, one by one, slow cooking the sauces with secret spices and stuffing the fresh pork sausages.

While a family inside is loading up coolers of pork sausage to take back to Wisconsin, we eye the beautiful baby orbs of fresh mozzarella with herbs, the prosciutto, the tortellini-peas-and-pesto salad. We'll have to come back for our homemade red sauces—meat and mushroom—and frozen cheese ravs. We order sandwiches on crusty homemade rolls, lush, firm Sicilian olives and the last slice of sky-high tiramisu, and sneak away for a heavenly few hours on the banks of spring-fed Lake Antoine (even Iron Mountain's lake is Italian) filled with swimming, eating and people-watching.

That night we end back at Bimbo's. Two older guys with gorgeous, carefully slicked-back gray hair come in and take seats at the bar. The bartender slides two paper plates in front of them. "Here's your two porkettas, piping hot." The men finish those and ask for two more.

After savoring his next sandwich, in a moment of obvious restraint, the man on the right gives his belly a loving pat and declares, "All good things come to an end."

But with any luck, or enough Italian pluck, the great kitchens of Iron Mountain's Northside never will.

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NORTHERN TRAVELER
Eating across Iron Mountain

Bimbo's Wine Press (L'Vino Torchio)
A charming corner tavern open for lunch and dinner with authentic porketta sandwiches (spicy pork roast on a crusty roll), boats (sausage in red sauce) and thin-crust pizza (pizza served Wednesdays and Fridays at 6 p.m., Thursdays and Saturdays at 9 p.m.). 314 E. MAIN AT VULCAN, 906-774-8420.

El Capitan Supper Club
Right across the border in Wisconsin, with steaks, hand-rolled gnocchi, jumbo prawns and slow-simmered red sauce made with meat drippings. Rebuilt last summer after a fire, El Cap goes back to 1926 with recipes from the Abruzzi region. TUESDAY–SUNDAY AT 5 P.M. 695 U.S. 2, FLORENCE, WISC., 715-696-3493.

Crispigna & Co. Italian Market
Gorgeous Genoa salami, caprese and porketta sandwiches for the perfect Italian picnic, plus homemade sauces and frozen handmade ravioli. 710 NORWAY, 906-774-0266, CRISPIGNASMARKET.COM

Fontana's Supper Club
High-backed booths, muted lighting, amazing red sauce, hand-cut steaks, homemade pastas made fresh daily. Monday–Saturday, 4:30 p.m. for cocktails, 5 p.m. for dinner. 115 S. STEPHENSON (U.S. 2), 906-774-0044.

Romagnoli's
Dwight Romagnoli carries on Grandma Ada and Grandpa Tulio's family-secret recipes from the Umbria province. Monday–Saturday, 4:30 p.m. U.S. 2 ON THE NORTHSIDE, 906-774-7300.