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EDITOR'S PICK

LET'S GET TAKEOUT

## **Cibus brings Sicilian stories to Waunakee and gluten-free gnocchi to customers' doors**

by Victoria Davis Nov 1, 2020

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Eugenia Mazza, owner of Cibus Italian Market, in Waunakee, stocks shelves with imported Italian foods.

RUTHIE HAUGE



by Victoria Davis

**F**rom teaching preschool in Sun Prairie to working as a waitress for Cafe Porta Alba, Sicilian-born Eugenia Mazza is now combining her love of education and her Italian island food with her own Waunakee market, Cibus.

“I wanted to bring a little bit of Sicily to Madison and give people an atmosphere where they could learn about Italian and Sicilian culture through food as well as art,” she said.

Cibus Italian Market, located right next to Wana Bike Shop off W. Main Street, opened this past July and stocks shelves of olive oil and vinaigrettes, ready-to-cook pasta, tomato and pesto sauces, packaged cookies and cakes, and a variety of jams. Many of these items are local to Sicily. All are available for online order with free at-home delivery or curbside pick-up.

And all items come with a story.

“We have rituals for hunting swordfish back home,” said Mazza, pulling a jar of Pesce Spada, or swordfish tomato sauce (\$8.49), off one of her shelves. “The rituals came from the Middle East and Africa, since those places are such a close neighbor to our island. The fisherman still chant before ritual hunting and fishing and they sing an old Arabic song as they cast out the net. They wait with the chief fisherman for the fish to come to this net and throw their harpoons. Once they pull the fish on board, they thank God and the Saints for having helped them in their battle against the fish giant of the sea.”

Pesce Spada has been the most popular item for Cibus customers and is made with tomato sauce, basil and eggplant. The market also has Seppia & Nero Di Seppia, black squid ink sauce (\$8.49) with calamari. But Mazza says that sauce usually appeals only to the more adventurous.



Pictured are Gnocchi with tomato, squid and squid ink sauce, and Egg Pasta with tomato and swordfish sauce, made from imported Italian goods from Cibus Italian Market in Waunakee.

RUTHIE HAUGE

“Some people think it’s a little too weird because of the black color,” Mazza said. “But I promise it’s very good once you try it.”

Using import companies Conca D’oro and Musco, the swordfish and squid ink sauces are just two of twelve types of tomato sauces Cibus offers. The market also harbors three different kinds of pesto sauces, six jams and sweet spreads as well as their extensive packaged pasta items, including gluten-free dumpling-form gnocchi pasta (\$6.99) and Fusilli, also known as Rotini (\$3.99), plus twelve choices of organic pasta such as Busiata Siciliana Lunga pasta (\$6.99). Of course, that also comes with its own Sicilian story.

“The women in Sicily actually use a weed cane to roll the pasta dough around and make a spiral,” Mazza said. “It goes really well with Sicilian pesto sauce which comes from when sailors from Genova came into Sicily and brought the idea of a salsa with basil and garlic, but then the Sicilians added almonds and cherry tomatoes.”

Mazza has wanted to share her love for Sicily with Waunakee since she first visited from Italy at the age of 14.

“There was a woman from Madison who lived in Italy, and every year she came to visit her mom, and she decided to offer to bring some kids along when she was here visiting,” Mazza said. “She did this for a couple of years. And I followed her for both years, staying with a family in Waunakee and once in Milwaukee. I really liked Wisconsin and I said, ‘One day, I will come back.’”



Eugenia Mazza, owner of Cibus Italian Market, poses for a portrait at her shop, at 204 W Main St, in Waunakee, on Wednesday, October 14, 2020.

RUTHIE HAUGE

Mazza returned to Madison to complete her Italian studies graduate program and Ph.D. at the university, spending twelve years teaching as first a teacher's assistant at the university, then moving on to preschool and then middle school. But after the economic crash, Mazza found it difficult to find work as a teacher and moved her endeavors to her other passion in life: Italian food.

“I didn’t want to start moving all around the United States to find a teaching position, and I already had my daughter, so I decided that I had to find something else,” Mazza said. “In Italy, we cook all the time. It’s part of the family ritual, having parents that cook and gathering the family together every day for lunch and dinner. It’s a really cooking-oriented culture. So I thought, ‘I like food, I’ll find a place to serve Italian food.’”

Mazza waitressed at Cafe Porta Alba for seven years, and last year Mazza decided it was time to create a vision of her own with the help of her husband and Waunakee native, Dan Ropers.

“Eugenia has a genuine passion for food and she really enjoys discussing it and sharing new flavors with friends and customers,” said Ropers, who celebrated his and Eugenia’s one-year anniversary last month. “She also has a real talent for making the store feel comfortable and welcoming and takes the time to introduce or explain products that we aren’t as familiar with here in the Midwest. I’ve enjoyed removing obstacles and helping whenever I can but Eugenia is definitely the secret ingredient.”

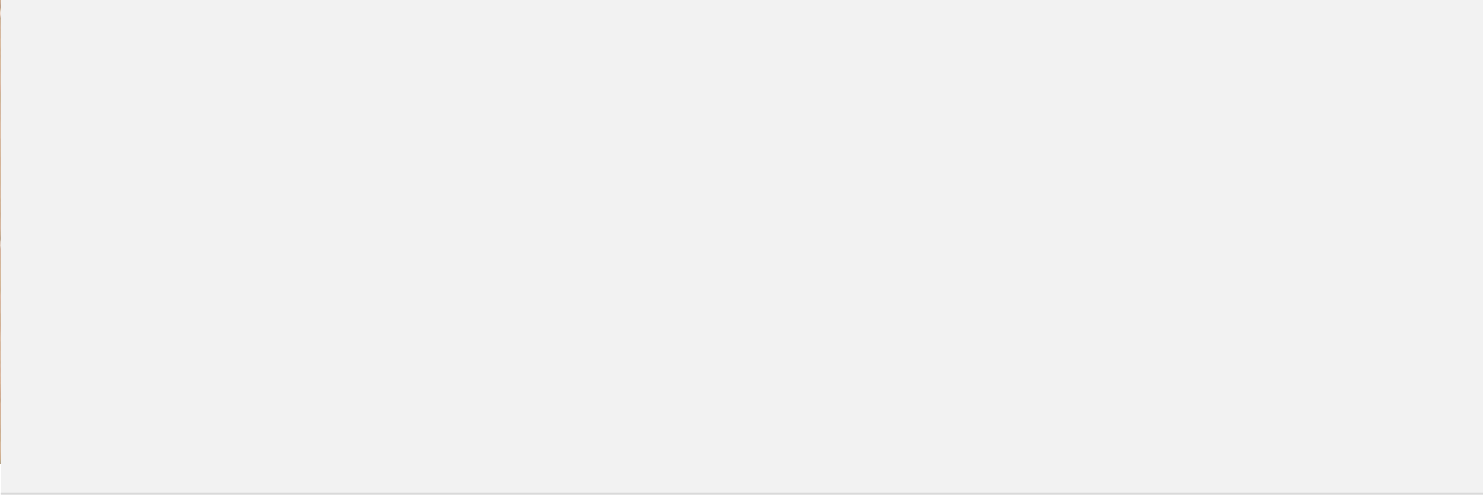


Italian sooden Pinocchio toys are available for purchase at Cibus Italian Market in Waunakee, on Wednesday, October 14, 2020.

RUTHIE HAUGE

Mazza's market features more than edible treats, including homemade headbands from her daughter, starfish earrings made from pasta boxes, Sicilian postcards from photos Mazza took herself and hand-made Coffa bags from Baruk in Palermo, Sicily. Cibus also has Heluna T-shirts for sale with baroque art found in Sicilian churches and Ceramic works from "Tre Erre Ceramiche" in Palermo, Italy. Two large ceramic heads of a man and a woman rest on a table toward the back of Cibus, and it's a favorite legend of Mazza's to share, especially with customers who enjoy Cibus' basil sauces.

"There was a man coming from North Africa, who came to Sicily and met this woman on her balcony, and they fell in love," Mazza said. "The man lived with this woman for a little while. But eventually wanted to go back to his country. The woman was so in love with him and didn't want the man to leave her, so she cut his head off and planted his head in a pot.



"From the pot, basil started to flourish and the woman would get so many compliments on her basil. That's why Sicilians started to build their pots the shape of a man's and woman's head. It's just a story, of course, but it's fun to tell people."

While Mazza does have regular customers that come visit the cozy market in person, COVID has made Cibus' over-the-phone and email ordering options much more popular. Especially since Mazza offers home deliveries for customers in the Madison and Waunakee areas. But she has hopes and plans for her market when customers feel more comfortable stopping by.





Imported Italian packaged desserts, such as Balconi Rollino Nocciola snack cakes, are available for purchase at Cibus Italian Market in Waunakee.

RUTHIE HAUGE

“I’ve had parents bring their children with them and they really enjoy the Rollino Nocciola cakes [\$6.59] with hazelnut cream filling,” Mazza said. “There is a daycare just in front of the street and I’ve told them I would really like to have the daycare visit, offer the cakes to the kids and tell them the story of Pinocchio with the puppets I have here. Not the Disney story, the real one. Teaching is just something I cannot suppress.”

Ropers added, “I still learn new things on a daily basis at our family’s own dinner table, how different pasta shapes, thickness, length and textures can make a big difference when making a meal and how specific sauces pair better with certain meals. Having stores like Cibus in the community help to introduce new concepts and ideas and hopefully take a small step towards bringing people of different cultures closer together.”

This month, Mazza will be adding a wide variety of traditional Italian cannolis, almond cookies and Sicilian cakes called Panettone and Pandoro for Thanksgiving and Christmas, with mandarin cream, lemon cream, or chocolate pudding inside. Mazza expects the new order to arrive by early November.

### Cibus Italian Market

204 West Main Street, Waunakee

Tues. - Sat. 10:00 to 5:30

(608) 516-8725

cibusitalianmarket.com

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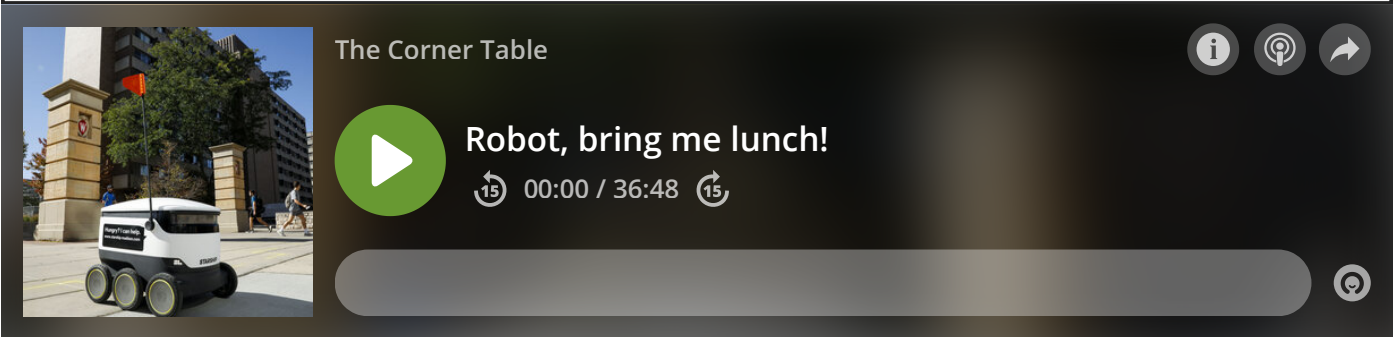
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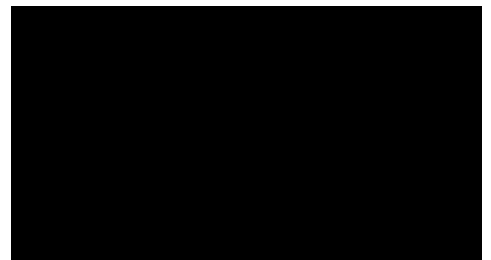
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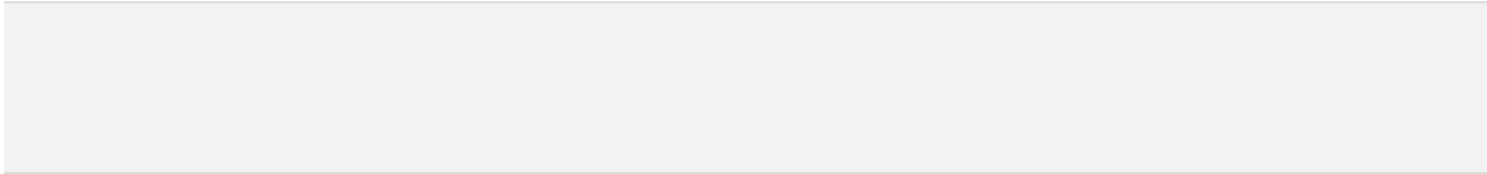
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