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TROPICAL LIFE

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A FORK ON THE ROAD Build a fine Italian meal with groceries from Palladio

Linda Bladholm
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Palladio Italian Gourmet Market, which opened in North Miami Beach over the summer, is named for the 15th century architect Andrea di Pietro della Gondola, known to history as "Palladio" from Pallas Athene, the Greek goddess of wisdom. The association is meant to emphasize what owner Daniele Podini calls the art of fine food.

Podini grew up in Milan in a food family. His grandfather was a cheese wholesaler and his father and two uncles created a supermarket chain. He relocated to South Florida in 2004, and opened his first Palladio in Boca Raton 18 months ago.

The latest store, in a new strip mall off Biscayne Boulevard, is spacious, brightly lit and well stocked. You can buy all



LINDA BLADHOLM/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

IN NORTH MIAMI BEACH: The selection at Palladio includes fresh pasta (displayed by executive chef Cristian Doria).

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Italian meal or choose from a huge selection of by-the-pound prepared foods for taking out or eating in at one of the tables in the dining section.

Podini says he opened the market to "satisfy what I see as a pressing need as more and more Americans demand and expect the convenience of gourmet-quality foods." Prices reflect the fact that many items are high-end imports -- from caviar to truffles.

Grab a cart and start in the produce section. This time of year there are ruby pomegranates; fat, frosty purple California figs; heirloom tomatoes in various sunset hues; doughnut peaches; and half a dozen types of eggplant. Although native to India, eggplant is one of the most popular vegetables (technically a fruit) in Italy, where it was introduced by Arabs in the 16th century. Its Italian name is melanzane, literally "mad apple," as it is in the nightshade family and was thought to cause insanity.

Choose from the familiar Globe and Black Beauty varieties as well as slender lavender Chinese, elongated white Casper and the striking mauve and white Pandora Striped Rose. They're in prime season right now and can be used interchangeably in most recipes. Just keep in mind that small, white, thick-skinned round ones are the sweetest, while the slim, thin-skinned Asian ones are the mildest with the fewest seeds.

Just past the pyramids of produce are a steam-table hot bar and cold salad bar for customers in a hurry. Selections range from olive oil-marinated mozzarella balls and cherry tomatoes with fresh basil to breaded and fried halibut fillets.

The prepared food counter, running half the length of the store, curves around from a pizza and pasta station where fresh-made, jet-black squid ink-flavored coils of noodles vie with multicolored tortellini and wide ribbons of egg-enriched pappardelle for taking home to cook.

For immediate gratification, get any of the daily lasagnes or crespelle (crepes) stuffed with mushrooms, asparagus or ricotta and spinach. The plum-tomato tart with cheese is also a tasty treat, as is the seared tuna served in thin peppercorn-rimmed slices.

If there's still room in your cart, stop by the seafood counter for everything from diver scallops to wild Arctic char. The meat counter features certified Angus beef, free-range chicken and homemade sausages.

Groceries include an extensive range of olive oils, balsamic vinegars, dried pastas, bottled sauces, Italian butter, jams, cheeses, cured meats, white tuna in olive oil and wines to fit every budget. It's impossible to wander this store without getting inspired by all edible art around.

Linda Bladholm's latest book is Latin and Caribbean Grocery Stores Demystified.

Place: Palladio Italian Gourmet Market.

Address: 15947 Biscayne Blvd., North Miami Beach; 2200 Glades Rd., Boca Raton.

Contact: 305-949-2184, 561-368-7988 (in Boca).

Hours: 9 a.m.-9 p.m. Monday-Saturday, 9 a.m.-7 p.m. Sunday.

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Prices: Salad and hot bar \$6.99 a pound; fresh pasta, pizza, lasagne \$6.99-\$8.99 a pound; chicken, pork, meats and seafood \$9.99-\$16.99 a pound.

FYI: Catering available.

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