Olive Garden Introduces New Menu; Traditional, Regional Dishes Reflect Restaurant's Italian Inspiration

ORLANDO, Fla., June 26 /PRNewswire/ -- Drawing from the flavors and cooking styles of regions throughout Italy, Olive Garden has added more fresh, simple and delicious items to its menu.

Olive Garden's Riserva di Fizzano restaurant and Culinary Institute of Tuscany, both located in a restored 11th-century village in Italy, have once again served as the inspiration for the new Italian dishes on Olive Garden's menu across North America.

"As you would find on tables throughout Italy, our new menu features items that are dominated by fresh and flavorful ingredients," said Drew Madsen, president of Olive Garden.

"Guests can enjoy a genuine Italian dining experience with our traditional menu favorites, as well as with exciting new dishes, all inspired by Italy." The staples of a typical Italian kitchen -- olive oil, fresh garlic and herbs, and vegetables -- serve as key ingredients for many of the new menu items including these appetizers:

- **Bruschetta:** Olive Garden's Bruschetta is made with Roma tomatoes tossed with sun-dried tomatoes to enhance sweetness and flavor; fresh basil and garlic. It's served with toasted ciabatta, a slipper-shaped bread also found in Tuscany.

- **Tomato & Mozzarella Caprese:** This traditional Italian appetizer is layered with sliced vine-ripened tomatoes (drizzled with balsamic vinegar), fresh basil leaves, fresh mozzarella, and then seasoned with extra-virgin olive oil, cracked black pepper and sea salt.

Olive Garden's new items represent a broad range of specialties, reflecting the culinary heritage found in more than 20 different regions throughout Italy. The new entrees are bursting with flavorful fresh vegetables, seasoned with Italian herbs and enhanced with classically Italian sauces:

- **Spaghetti delle Rocca:** This light dish originates in Southern Italy, but variations are enjoyed throughout the country. Olive Garden's Spaghetti delle Rocca features a savory tomato sauce joined with fresh vine-ripened cherry tomatoes, olives, mushrooms, onions, basil and garlic, tossed with spaghetti.

- **Mediterranean Shrimp Scampi:** From Venice and areas around the Adriatic Sea comes this contemporary version of a traditional favorite. Large sauteed shrimp, fresh vine-ripened cherry tomatoes, olives and white wine are served over linguine.

- **Mixed Grill:** A mainstay throughout the Italian countryside, Olive Garden's Mixed Grill is comparable to a spiedino misto found on most menus in the region of Tuscany. Mixed Grill is skewers of grilled chicken and Italian sausage served with roasted potatoes and seasonal vegetables. The chicken is marinated with olive oil, fresh lemon juice, garlic and rosemary; the sausage is served over a rosemary demi-glace.

Reminiscent of the sweets found in a pasticceria in Italy, Olive Garden's new desserts are light and traditional:

- **Lemon Cream Cake:** A mildly sweet dessert, this delicate white cake with a subtle, whipped lemon filling is set in a light Italian-style cake.

- **Berries & Zabaione:** A seasonal dessert of fresh strawberries and blueberries topped with a light Marsala custard. Berries sit atop orange sorbet, which complements their tartness.

"We've taken our menu to new heights with more distinctly Italian flavors, robust aromas and fresh ingredients," said Salli Setta, senior vice president of culinary and beverage for Olive Garden. "This menu has a particular focus on presenting favorites from different regions throughout Italy."

To bring the genuine Italian dining experience to guests, Olive Garden sends managers to the Culinary Institute of Tuscany to enhance their knowledge of traditional Italian cooking under the direction of Executive Chef Romana Neri. To date, more than 200 Olive Garden culinary managers throughout North America have trained there and have been immersed in the food, wine and culture of Italy.
Wine plays a central role in the Italian meal because it enhances the true flavor of any dish and creates a comfortable atmosphere at the table. Olive Garden's Wine Institute of Napa Valley, which opened in June 2001 as a counterpart to the Culinary Institute, educates restaurant managers on wine history, food and wine pairing, and how to help guests feel less intimidated about ordering wine. Olive Garden's new menu lists wine pairings for everything from appetizers to desserts.

Olive Garden also has been recognized nationally with several culinary and beverage awards, most recently receiving the "Menus 2002 Silver Skillet" from Restaurant Business, an industry publication, for overall menu excellence; "America's Best Casual Dining Wine List Award" by the Monterey Wine Festival; and "Best Overall Beverage Program" by Cheers magazine, an industry publication.

Olive Garden is the leading restaurant in the Italian dining segment with 496 restaurants, more than 60,000 employees and $1.9 billion in annual sales. Olive Garden is a division of Darden Restaurants Inc. (NYSE: DRI - News), the world's largest casual dining company. Visit Olive Garden's Web site at www.olivegarden.com.

Olive Garden's Spaghetti delle Rocca

According to Paolo Lafata, senior executive chef of culinary development for Olive Garden and native to Southern Italy, "Spaghetti delle Rocca is a classic dish bursting with flavor and includes many fresh ingredients found in a traditional Italian kitchen."

This light dish originates in Southern Italy, but variations are enjoyed throughout the country. Olive Garden's Spaghetti delle Rocca features a savory tomato sauce joined with fresh vine-ripened cherry tomatoes, olives, mushrooms, onions, basil and garlic, tossed with spaghetti.

Wine Pairing Recommendation: Rocca delle Macie Sangiovese

Ingredients:

1 fl oz extra-virgin olive oil
1 tbsp minced fresh garlic
2 oz washed and dried quartered button mushrooms
2 oz 1/4 inch diced yellow onions
2 lbs cherry tomatoes (cut in half)
1/2 cup pitted Kalamata black olives
1/2 cup pitted green olives
2 tsp capers, rinsed
1/4 cup chopped fresh basil
1 tbsp minced fresh parsley
1/2 tsp salt
1/4 tsp crushed red pepper flakes
1 lb dry pasta (follow box directions for cooking pasta)
Grated parmesan cheese to taste

Directions:

* Place oil in sauce pot
* Add garlic, onions and mushrooms. Cook for one minute; do not brown
* Add cherry tomatoes, Kalamata olives, green olives, capers, fresh basil, fresh parsley, salt and crushed red pepper flakes; saute for 10 minutes, stirring frequently
* In a large bowl, combine sauce and drained pasta while both are hot
* Top with grated parmesan cheese; garnish with fresh basil leaves
* Serves four

Olive Garden's Mixed Grill

"Spiedino misto (skewered mix), the traditional style of skewering chicken and sausage, is a mainstay in Italy," says Giacomo Ciabattini, Olive Garden executive chef and director of culinary development. "This favorite summertime dish can be found in
restaurants throughout the Italian countryside."

Olive Garden’s Mixed Grill is skewers of grilled chicken and Italian sausage served with roasted potatoes and seasonal vegetables.

Wine Pairing Recommendation: Ruffino Aziano Chianti Classico

Ingredients:
2 lb skinless boneless chicken breast (4 oz each)
1 lb Italian sausage links, mild
1 pint cherry tomatoes
1 bag bamboo skewers, soaked in water

Marinade:
2 tsp Colavita pepper oil
2 tbsp chopped fresh rosemary
1/2 cup fresh lemon juice
1 tsp salt
3 bay leaves broken into pieces
2 large garlic cloves pressed

Directions:

- Cut each piece of chicken in half length-wise
- Thread each chicken piece onto a skewer; add a cherry tomato to the end of each skewer
- For chicken marinade, in a large baking dish mix pepper oil, rosemary, lemon juice, salt, bay leaves and pressed garlic
- Place each chicken skewer in the marinade and marinate for at least three hours
- Bake sausage at 350 F for 20 minutes. Cut each link into three pieces; set aside
- Cook chicken on grill until internal temperature reaches 165 F or cook in oven at 350 F until internal temperature reaches 165 F
- Skewer sausage and place on hot grill until internal temperature reaches 155 F or cook in oven at 350 F until internal temperature reaches 155 F
- When cooked completely, place on a large platter, garnish with rosemary sprigs, lemon halves and any remaining cherry tomatoes
- Serves four