

Bella Milano wins small business award



Nathan Grimm | The Telegraph

Bella Milano owners Sam Guarino, left, and Craig Kalogerou stand front and center with their Small Business of the Month award sign from the RiverBend Growth Association. The growth association presented the owners with the award at a ceremony Friday.

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EDWARDSVILLE — Bella Milano is known for exceptional Italian cuisine, but it was the business's customer service and community involvement that got them recognized by the RiverBend Growth Association on Friday.

RBGA director of member services Joell Aguirre and members of the growth association turned out to congratulate Bella Milano owners Sam Guarino and Craig Kalogerou on their first RBGA Small Business of the Month award for September.

Aguirre said the selection committee chose Bella Milano for their two outstanding traits.

"What made them one of the highest-scoring winners is their community involvement, their commitment to customer service — which includes staff, food, and product," Aguirre said. "So really, customer service and community involvement is what really made Bella Milano stand out."

The owners are involved in a number of different community groups and events, including Hope Animal Rescue, Taste of Edwardsville and Hospice of Southern Illinois, among others. Guarino also sits on the board of directors for Riverbend Head Start.

"We're honored," Guarino said. "There are so many great businesses that do so much for the community. We've enjoyed

our relationship very much with RiverBend. So we're certainly honored to be chosen as the Business of the Month."

It's the first such award for Bella Milano, which has been at 1063 State Route 157 in Edwardsville for 11 years.

And despite being around over a decade, Kalogerou said last year was the best yet for the business.

But the owners aren't content with staying the same. Earlier this year they expanded their menu to include small plates, a growing trend in the restaurant business that allows diners to order and share smaller portions of food rather than one larger entree. Bella Milano

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also revamped its drink menu to incorporate new wines and signature drinks.

"We're always evolving," Kalogerou said.

"We're always updating our menu. That's ongoing, that's constant."

Kalogerou also said the restaurant will be revising its menu in the coming weeks in anticipation of fall. It's that commitment to always improving, along with the customer service

and community involvement mentioned by Aguirre, that makes Bella Milano successful.

"I think the biggest thing is that every day we're looking for another way to surprise and wow our guests," Guarino said. "It's our mantra. Every day we

get better or worse, so we're constantly looking for new boutique events, fun events, new menu options. We're constantly challenging ourselves to be better than we were yesterday."

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