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Hope You're Hungry!

Carmine's at The Quarter offers large portions, Italian fare.

By Frank Gabriel

Posted Feb. 17, 2010 | Comments: 0 | [Add Comment](#)

For generations of southern Italian immigrants New York City served, along with Boston and surprising most, New Orleans, as principal ports of arrival to lives in the New World.

Carmine's restaurant, in Tropicana's The Quarter dining and shopping district, originated as a Gotham City fixture 20 years ago. Here the food and culture of those 20 million who proudly call themselves Italian-Americans is celebrated and venerated.

Menus are replaced with billboard-size signage on walls, proclaiming the wide-ranging bill of fare. Food is family style, encouraging and except for that most ravenous of patrons, pretty much requiring sharing.

How big are the portions? We hear you asking. We'll get to that in just a moment.

We like to think that creative, well-executed additions are a true barometer of a kitchen's strengths. The final necessity to that equation — articulate servers who enthusiastically sell them — was readily apparent on this night. Described as an evening's salad of field greens, cherry tomatoes, shaved red onions and fennel, sliced green apple, matchstick carrots, walnuts, dried cranberries and gorgonzola cheese with a balsamic vinaigrette, this first of three verbally recited items sounded like a lighter starter in anticipation of the abundant quantities of food we knew to expect.

But, as our sharp waitstaffer went on to explain, house portions, right down to the salads, are staggering. Told that this, like the Carmine's and Caesar salads, will typically provide enough for several people, we ate heartily and barely dented half. The ingredients, all full of verve and crunch, were tossed with care and not drowned by heavy dressing.

Stuffed artichokes delivered an oversized sample of Italy's unofficial national vegetable, filled with a golden breadcrumb mix. Its softened outer petals opened like a beautiful flower to the far edges of the plate. Informed that the kitchen uses chicken stock, rather than water in the cooking process, we picked up a great culinary trick and plan on borrowing it at home in the near future.

This creativity added a different flavor element than we've previously experienced. It's always cool when a kitchen surprises you pleasantly, and the deep essence of that broth combined with Romano cheese and garlic worked magically together.

The artichoke was expertly prepped and cooked. Not an easy process — peeling just the right amount of the spiny exterior leaves. The knife skills evidenced were nothing short of artistry. This left only the tenderest, truly edible pieces. No need to scrape this soft flesh, the entirety of the remainder was a tasty, textural delight. We greedily devoured the entire bulb, leaving nothing behind but an outline of olive oil.

Our entrees, shrimp fra diavolo and lasagne, were sizeable enough to feed at least two additional folks. We asked for the spicy seafood atop linguine, giving a food runner an opportunity to show off his presentation skills. He graciously spooned, spiraled and plated a tight, pretty turban of pasta for us. Nicely done. The sauce was the righteous star though, bright, red and chunky, packing heat courtesy of dried red pepper. About a dozen jumbo shrimp, sweet and full of natural juices, poked their heads out of the steamy foot and half long platter.

A literal brick of lasagne brought our way was two inches in depth and crafted with nine luscious layers. The traditional multi-meat mix used had been seasoned aggressively, something we really welcome in oven-baked pastas. Just as noticeable was the optimal level of moisture retained. Carmine's version not only accentuated each element's individual qualities, but maintained the structural integrity of this classic as we gamely dug in for seconds.

Carnivores need not feel left out of the feeding frenzy here. Chicken entrees like signature specialties Scarpariello and Contadino each feature an entire, sliced bird. Four different Porterhouse steaks are available, and on Saturdays a monstrous Prime rib accommodates up to four diners.

We split a pair of smaller desserts, a three-piece order of chocolate cannoli and tartufo. The latter, a baseball-shaped mound of chocolate and vanilla ice cream with a cherry center, was covered in a dark, rich chocolate shell. The cannolis, light and crisp, were finished at each of their ricotta-filled edges by the pleasant addition of crumbled pistachios.

Carmine's Restaurant

Where: The Quarter at Tropicana, Atlantic City

Phone: 348-6737

Details: Liquor license, major credit cards accepted.



Carmine's at The Quarter at the Tropicana