

Tom Sietsema on Carmine's: Penn Quarter Italian restaurant thinks big -- in many ways

By [Tom Sietsema](#)
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The woman at the table next to mine at Carmine's gasps when her lunch is set before her. I know the sound well, having heard it before -- made it before -- in this brash new Italian restaurant in Penn Quarter. The only reason I know my neighbor hasn't been served tennis balls on top of spaghetti is because the orbs are red with tomato sauce.

Later, I discover that the beef-and-veal meatballs are also tender, and veined with basil and Romano cheese: pleasing, in other words.

And that's the biggest surprise at the colossal Carmine's, which didn't so much sail as barrel into town when it opened in 20,000 square feet of space in August. Despite its size (nearly 700 seats) and its parentage (it's part of a New York chain owned by the Alicart Group), the restaurant succeeds where I thought it would fail by serving food that really and truly smacks of an Italian grandmother's kitchen.

Make that a couple dozen Italian grandmothers' kitchens.

The first lady is unlikely to use Carmine's as a stage for her anti-obesity campaign. I've never seen a single plate of food here that couldn't serve a herd of diners, which explains why the waiters tend to sprinkle their introductions with yield signs. "The dishes are served family-style," they say. One appetizer or salad is plenty for three or four to share, they tell groups that size. "We're happy to wrap up leftovers," they conclude, leaving you to contemplate one of the outsize menus posted throughout the place.

Trends have no home on the list, which runs to all the usual spaghetti-house favorites. Baked clams and stuffed artichokes? Check. Lasagna and chicken parmigiana? But of course. There's shrimp marinara for the seafood lover and prime rib offered as a Saturday night special. Cooked just the way you ask, the last is served in thick slabs as part of an edible landscape bordered by a field of very good whipped potatoes and a forest of garlicky broccoli rabe. It's bodacious.

Where to start? The signature salad is an abundance of chopped lettuce, cheese, peppers and sausage, everything tossed with a vinegar dressing that gives the garden a nice zing. Carmine's does well by chicken wings, too. Meaty and juicy, the flock is more herby (with rosemary) than spicy, and it comes with accouterments of blue cheese and sliced fennel instead of the expected celery. Lighter (sort of) is the fried zucchini, an Everest of tempura-like vegetable that my small posse manages to whittle down to something closer to the Blue Ridge. The only reason we stop tackling the cayenne-spiked mountain is that we know there is more big food heading our way, including rigatoni "country style." The pasta is one of my favorites at Carmine's, in part because the rigatoni retains some bite, and in part because the bowl also fits in soft white beans, crumbly fennel-spiced sausage, roasted garlic, browned broccoli florets and a butter-enriched sauce: enough fuel for a small country.

When all of its inside doors are open and the vastness of Carmine's is exposed, the sunny yellow interior with its sea of tables and old family photographs could pass for a set designed by Cecil B. DeMille. The doors slide and fold, however, to create more intimate spaces, as necessary.

Chances are, your wine will be the right temperature. The design includes coolers for the bottles, built into the walls. Although the gift shop upfront probably pegs Carmine's as a tourist destination, at least the cookbook for sale includes recipes for meals you might want to replicate at home.

I'd be more excited about Carmine's if the bread basket had more character and the cheese on its Caesar didn't resemble flavored sawdust. And while I appreciate the kitchen's generosity, it would be nice to have some scaled-back dishes to accommodate light eaters or solo diners. I felt wasteful eating fewer than half of the 12 baked clams in an appetizer by myself one afternoon; as good as the gratineed seafood was, I wasn't going to let out a suit to finish it.

Carmine's is too loud and crowded to be a date place, but it would be perfect for a reunion of relatives or friends who want something fun and filling and don't mind sharing. (I'd almost bet \$100 that no diner can successfully, and single-handedly, sink the ice cream dessert billed as "titanic," built from flourless chocolate cake, five scoops of ice cream, roasted pineapple, cookies and whipped cream.)

Service in this setting is more personal than you might expect at such a giant business. One night, as I stood in a mass at the bar, I saw a genial bartender pause from his shaking and stirring to twirl and apportion an order of pasta for two guests. At lunch, when I casually mentioned to a manager that someone from my office would be eating my leftovers, she tucked extra napkins, utensils and even bread into the shopping bags.

Carmine's focus on bigness, it turns out, extends to its heart.

Two stars (Good)

Carmine's

425 Seventh St. NW. 202-737-7770.
carminesny.com.

Open: Sunday through Thursday 11 a.m. to 11 p.m.,
Friday and Saturday 11 a.m. to midnight. Major
credit cards accepted. Valet parking \$10 at dinner.

Metro: Gallery Place-Chinatown and Archives.

Prices: Lunch appetizers \$13-\$18, pasta and entree
salads \$12-\$17; dinner appetizers \$10.50-\$26.50,
entrees \$19.50-\$34.50.

Sound check: 86 decibels/extremely loud.



Midweek lunch crowd at Carmine's at 425 7th Street, N.W. in Washington, D.C. This family-style 700 seat restaurant features antique chandeliers, old photos on the walls, and classic Italian fare. (Scott Suchman)