

Atlantic City Weekly®

What's happening at the Jersey Shore



Mangia, Mangia

Be prepared for big portions, warm atmosphere at Carmine's

By Sandy Posnak

Think BIG - really BIG. OK, now you have the perfect mindset for a meal at Carmine's, the family-style Italian restaurant at The Quarter at Tropicana that's already known for its tremendous portions. How huge? They're so enormous that each dish can satisfy a hungry group of three, four or more. If you go as a couple, you'll have enough leftovers to fill a large Carmine's shopping bag.

The original Carmine's opened in New York's Upper West Side in 1990; four years later a second restaurant debuted in the Big Apple's theater district. The recently opened Atlantic City Carmine's is the first to operate outside of Manhattan. Its menu features the same genuine, Southern Italian cuisine as its New York counterparts, and its ambience is also similar, with many dark wood touches and photos of celebrities - mostly Italian - hanging on the walls.

We had dinner at Carmine's last week and everything about the experience conveyed the feel of the quintessential New York Italian restaurant that we covet when visiting Manhattan.

Dinner kicked off with nibblings from a basket filled with crunchy breadsticks, fresh semolina bread and homemade foccacia, all perfect for dipping into the garlicky olive oil mixture provided. A word of advice to first time Carmine's diners: as enticing as the bread may be, don't stuff yourself with it; save room for the cornucopia of food that will follow.

Carmine's menu does not describe the dishes, but the servers are well informed about the contents of all menu items and stand ready to share this knowledge with diners. Our server answered queries about the makeup of "Carmine's salad" and described the ingredients used in chicken scarpariello and spiedini alla Romana. She also suggested that we share a single entrée and one salad, a recommendation that we wisely heeded.

The restaurant's appetizers and entrées are served family style. So, advice #2 to Carmine's neophytes is to gather up a group of friends or relatives to join you at the restaurant, and then have fun eating and socializing just as you would do at an old-fashioned Italian-American wedding feast.

The menu's selection of appetizers includes choices such as stuffed artichoke, zuppa di mussels, roasted peppers with anchovies and mozzarella, Carmine's salad, a mountainous platter of fried calamari, and a hot antipasto. Appetizers range in price from \$12.50 for an order of stuffed mushrooms to \$26.50 for the hot antipasto platter.

Among the dozens of entrées are chicken parmigiana, broiled porterhouse steak, lobster fra diavolo, rigatoni country style, and a pasta dish simply named ragu. It's prepared with sausage, meatballs, pork braciola and small clumps of pork served over a giant helping of rigatoni topped with a red sauce. Other favorites are chicken marsala, meatballs and pasta,

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veal parmigiana, and porterhouse steak prepared with peppers and onions. Entrées are priced from \$21.50 (chicken marsala, a couple of pasta dishes) to \$27.50 (veal parmigiana). Lobster and porterhouse steaks are at market price. Everything is à la carte, but side orders of vegetables and meatballs are available.

Husband Dan and I began our meals by sharing the yummy signature Carmine's salad prepared with three types of lettuce, assorted cheeses, meats, olives and tomatoes (\$21.50). Our chicken marsala entrée served over angel hair pasta was delicious (\$21.50 for marsala; \$8.50 extra for pasta). This sweet, savory Italian classic covered a huge platter with tender chicken breasts and lots of fresh mushrooms, all served over a mound of the pasta. The subtle marsala flavor combined with the other ingredients to make this a winner.

Next came the splurge: a chocolate cannoli and a slice of Italian cheesecake. I vowed that I'd never use the cliché 'decadent' to describe desserts in a dining review, but if I did, the word would aptly apply to both of these meal endings.

David Cohen, general manager of Carmine's at The Quarter at Tropicana has been associated with Carmine's for a dozen years. Cohen is a natural to manage a restaurant known for its giant portions. Being of Italian/Jewish heritage, he's used to large helpings, and he likely was told to "Mangia, mangia" and "Eat more, David, eat more" many times throughout his youth.

Carmine's kitchen is headed up by Jeff Gotta, a 1988 graduate of the Academy of Culinary Arts at Atlantic Cape Community College in Mays Landing. Gotta, a veteran Atlantic City chef, trained at Manhattan's Carmine's restaurants for almost a year prior to the opening of Carmine's at The Quarter. Carmine's embraces two levels and can seat approximately 480 people. To take full advantage of your visit, arrive about 10 minutes prior to your reservation and peruse the photos of legends such as Perry Como, Rocky Marciano, Joe DiMaggio, Frank Sinatra and Mario Lanza. Snapshots of family members and photos taken at Italian wedding receptions also add a warm, homey touch to the dining rooms. Carmine's is a welcome addition to The Quarter dining mix.

Carmine's Atlantic City is located in The Quarter at Tropicana, 2801 Pacific Avenue, Atlantic City. Current hours: Open Sun.-Thurs. from 11:30am-11pm; Fri. & Sat. from 11:30am-midnight. Hours will be extended during summer months. Large, well-stocked bar; daily dinner specials; non-smoking and smoking areas. All-purpose catering; private parties accommodated; take-out menu; lunch menu; free valet parking. with voucher. Reservations are recommended. Phone 572-9300.