

The Virginian-Pilot

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RESTAURANT REVIEW

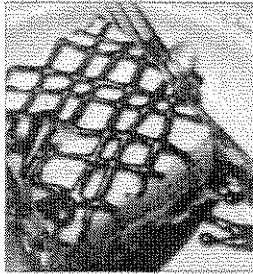
Carrabba's: good service, affordable Italian fare

BY TAMMY JAXTHEIMER
RESTAURANT CRITIC

I'VE ALWAYS GONE out of my way to support the independent local businessman. I knew my boyfriend (now husband) had a good chance of winning my heart when he agreed to bypass conveniently placed fast food outlets in search of an advertised local barbecue joint while en route to Clemson for a football weekend.

Now that we have children, however, we do patronize the occasional chain when it makes our lives less complicated and plain more enjoyable.

Recently we visited Carrabba's Italian Grill in Virgilina Beach. It's owned by Outback Steakhouse Inc. and has the same business concept - local



Dessert Sogno Di Croccolata

CARRABBA'S ITALIAN GRILL

739 Lynnhaven Pkwy, Suite 100,
Virginia Beach

(757) 631-0856

Tuscan-style fare

Pleasant venue

managing partners. So now I'm pulling for local businessman Ken Amiot, whose previous experiences include Don Pablos and Joe's Crab Shack.

The hostess' greeting was warm, as were the surroundings. Coat hooks on the booths were a nice touch. The Carrabba's at Lynnhaven Mall has been open since September and is the third in the area, behind locations in Newport News and Chesapeake.

From the "antipasti heading" we had zeroed in on "cozze in bianco" (\$9.99), mussels steamed in white wine, basil, lemon butter and Pernod. I had tried them when Carrabba's initially opened and remembered them as quite lovely.

Our server was so fabulous

Please see Review, Page F9



JENNIFER ACKERMAN PHOTOS/SPECIAL TO THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

Bartender Mindy Reedy pours a glass of white wine from behind the bar at Carrabba's in Virginia Beach. The chain restaurant is owned by Outback Steakhouse Inc.

Review: Lynnhaven Mall is site of third local Carrabba's

Continued from Page F8

I forgot to order the mussels. She introduced herself, gave us appropriate time to peruse the menu and returned in time to answer questions. She offered taste samples of wines by the glass and focused on our young daughters as if they were the ones with the tipping power. Complimentary bread and herbed olive oil, happily replenished upon request, were enjoyed by young and old alike. I look forward to returning for the tender mollusks in the toothsome broth.

When we were having difficulty choosing between Chicken Bryan (\$14.99) and Pollo Rosa Maria (\$15.49), our server asked if I liked goat cheese and mushrooms. I said "yes" to both, and she suggested I have the Chicken Trio Combo, which also includes Chicken Marsala (\$14.99). The combo, an "off-menu" selection, lets diners try three chicken preparations for \$19.49.

Grilled Chicken Marsala, topped with plenty of mushrooms and a pleasant sauce, was tasty, but I prefer the more delicate cutlet prepara-



JENNIFER ACKERMAN

Cozze in Bianco - Prince Edward Island mussels in white wine, basil, lemon, butter and Pernod - is \$9.99 at Carrabba's.

tion, allowing a larger Marsala presence. Rosa Maria, a stuffed breast with fontina cheese and prosciutto laced with a savory basil lemon butter sauce, played well with the wood-burning grill flavor. The champion chicken was "Bryan." The same savory basil lemon butter sauce served an even nobler cause with a perfectly grilled boneless breast topped with goat cheese and sun-dried tomatoes. It was simply sumptu-

ous. "From the grill" items offer a choice of house, Italian or Caesar salads or a cup of homemade soup and an accompaniment of pasta, garlic mashed potatoes or vegetable of the day. Caesar salad in a chilled bowl received a thumbs-up from our youngest, who is spoiled by the classically prepared version on a regular basis. The croutons, albeit better than most, couldn't compete with the

homemade she's accustomed to.

Fresh green beans, sauteed with a bit of crisp left in them and finished with chopped red peppers and shredded parmesan, were appealing.

Because of its silly name, Pasta Weesie (\$13.99) was hard to get past on the pasta specialties. Half a dozen sauteed shrimp atop fettuccine Alfredo with mushrooms and scallions were fine, but the menu-listed garlic was undetectable and shelled shrimp still had bits of tail shells.

The children's menu offers a variety of options priced from \$4.49 to \$4.99, and they include a beverage. Spaghetti with a meatball (\$4.99) was enjoyable, reminding me of my Grandma Gravalesse's recipe. Ground beef with specks of parsley delivered a well-balanced blend of herbs and spices.

Cheese pizza was well received by my daughter. Kids 10 and under can also opt for pepperoni for the same price of \$4.49. The thin crust from the 600-degree wood-burning brick oven had a pleasing flavor. From the regular menu you can order

CARRABBA'S ITALIAN GRILL	
Address: 739 Lynnhaven Pkwy, Suite 100, Virginia Beach	Payment: Visa, MasterCard, American Express, Discover, Club and Cheque
Phone: (757) 631-0856	Reservations: Accepted for parties of eight or more; call ahead; courtesy fee applies
Hours: Monday, Tuesday & 10:30 a.m. - 10:00 p.m.; Friday & 11 a.m. - 10:00 p.m.; Saturday & 11 a.m. - 10:00 p.m.	Handicapped accessible for Smoking, Non-smoking dining, online reservation for the state
Prices: Lunch and snack \$2.99 - \$11.99; appetizers and wine \$3.99 - \$14.99; entrees \$13.99 - \$27.99; kids \$4.49 - \$4.99; beverages \$1.99 - \$2.99 and children's menu \$4.49 - \$4.99	Child friendly, booster seats, high chairs and children's menu available

Margherita (\$7.99) with roma tomatoes, basil and fresh whole-milk mozzarella or create your own (\$9.99) with such toppings as Italian sausage, pepperoni, meatballs, black olives, mushrooms, sweet peppers, onions and fresh or sun-dried tomatoes.

From the handful of homemade desserts, chocolate dream (\$5.49) was a sleeper. A fudge brownie brushed with Kahlua had a thick layer of chocolate mousse and whipped cream and wa-

drizzled with chocolate sauce. It took us by surprise with its rich, fresh, delicious taste.

I look forward to returning to Carrabba's in Virginia Beach or one of the other 200 locations across the United States. Moderately priced, freshly prepared Italian fare in a service-oriented, comfortable venue is hard to resist.

Reach Tammy Jaxtheimer at flavor@pilotonline.com. To rate area restaurants online yourself, click www.hamptonroads.com/dining/

The Record

January 26, 2006

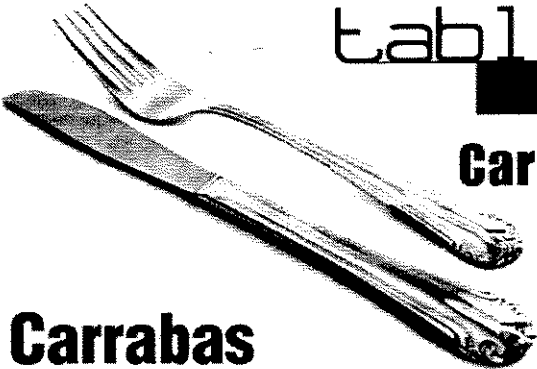
Table for 2 dining in the capital district

Carrabba's unchains fine Italian flavors



Carrabba's

Photo by J.S. Carras



Carrabas



LATHAM — There is no shortage of good Italian restaurants in this area. So when a chain like Carrabba's enters the market and becomes a huge success, you know they are doing something right.

The large and comfortable restaurant was filled on a Thursday night, proving that good food at fair prices coupled with concern for the customer will breed success — be it for a chain or an independent restaurant.

Carrabba's, which is located in Latham on Route 7 (just west of Northway exit 6), is the kind of place the entire family can enjoy. A couple can have a sophisticated meal, or a family with youngsters can make a party by eating at the counter to watch made-to-order pizzas being prepared in the open kitchen.

Most entrees are priced at about \$15, but there is something about the menu that encourages trading up.

For instance, for an extra \$2.99, your entree will come with soup or a house, Italian or Caesar salad.

There are also deals to be found. We were going to have calamari (\$7.99) as an appetizer. Then we noticed the "Antipasti Platter," which included calamari, plus bruschetta and mozzarella marinara for \$9.99.

The two extra dollars got us a feast. The platter was so big it could serve as an entrée, and each item was delicious. I was impressed at the lightness of each item. Everything was so good, it felt as if you were wasting time dipping them in the marinara sauce. But I challenge you to try the sauce once and not dip again. It's that good.

Long Term avoided the pasta, as she did not want a heavy meal. Danielle, our charming and knowledgeable waitress suggested the grilled salmon (\$16.99). It was a large portion, and the fish was flaky fresh. The unique dressing gave it a pleasing flavor that was in keeping with the Italian tradition. A side of well-prepared mixed vegetables made Long Term a happy customer. I ordered the Pasta Weesie (\$13.99), which is shrimp sauteed in garlic, lemon butter

WHAT Carrabba's Italian Grill
WHERE 875 Troy Schenectady Road, Latham, 765-8888
HOURS Sun. 3 p.m. - 9:30 p.m.; Mon.-Thurs. 4 p.m. - 10 p.m.; Fri. 4 p.m. - 11 p.m.; Sat. 3 p.m. - 11 p.m.
PRICES Appetizers and pizza, \$7.99-\$9.99; entrees, \$12.99-\$15.99; Desserts \$4.99
Handicapped Access: Good
Return Visit? Yes

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and wine sauce, served with mushrooms over fettuccine Alfredo.

After the large antipasti platter, it was impossible even to consider finishing the large bowl of fettuccine mixed with abundant shrimp. But I tried, real hard, and still had a good-sized meal packed for home.

Dessert was out of the question, though they were tempting and like everything else at Carrabba's reasonably priced.

I had a glass of Chianti wine (\$6), Long Term a giriger ale

(\$2.19). Our water glasses were constantly filled and included a refreshing slice of lemon. Too, the fresh bread and olive oil for dipping was wonderful to nibble on as we chose our meals.

The total for the food and drink came to \$57.82. With tax and a \$9 tip, the total came to \$66.82. Considering that we actually had the equivalent of three entrees and took home enough food for another couple of meals, that's a really good deal. The important thing, though, is that we enjoyed everything we tasted. □

Carrabba's Italian Grill

Because Carrabba's Italian Grill is a chain that offers carryout from all of its numerous locations, my expectations were high. Much to my delight, the new Creve Coeur restaurant exceeded those expectations.

Carrabba's attention to details includes providing an entrance in the back of the building specifically for carryout orders and reserving three "Carside Carryout" parking spots. Our food was packed in sturdy plastic containers with clear lids. The pasta came in a microwavable plastic dish that had a hole on top for venting. Plus, the restaurant took care to pack a menu and magnet with its location and phone number to make the next order easy.

The food also exceeded our expectations. As we unpacked our bags, we discovered a generous amount of warm bread, plus a small packet of olive oil, herbs and freshly grated Parmesan cheese, the ingredients to make a good dipping plate.

Our entree came with a side salad, and I ordered an additional salad for \$2.99 to accompany the pasta. I chose a house salad and an Italian salad. The house included lettuce, carrots, celery, olives and pepperoncini with a creamy Parmesan dressing on the side. The Italian featured the same toppings plus diced toma-

At a glance

10923 Olive Boulevard
Creve Coeur
314-872-3241
and 2558 Highway K
O'Fallon, Mo.
636-281-1067
www.carrabbas.com

atoes and onion. It was served with a vinaigrette-style Italian dressing. Both salads were fresh and crispy. I especially enjoyed the Parmesan dressing, which didn't taste as heavy as many and had a pleasant bite from the large amount of Parmesan.

The grilled salmon (\$15.99) comes with a sauce of the day. On the Saturday we ordered, it was served with a spicy tomato sauce. The generous fillet was moist, perfectly flaky and flavorful. The sauce added a nice bite.

I mistakenly ordered two sides when I was only supposed to select one, but the waitress said the kitchen would be happy to provide half of each. We ended up with garlic mashed potatoes and asparagus, which was the vegetable of the day. Both turned out to be generous portions and rounded out the meal nicely. The asparagus seemed a little overcooked but still had some crunch and a pleasant, sweet flavor. The potatoes were rich and creamy.

Outside of the small, colorful pieces of red peels, they had a wonderfully smooth texture.

In addition to the salmon, I sampled the mezzaluna (\$10.99), ravioli stuffed with chicken, ricotta and spinach and served in a creamy tomato sauce. The ravioli were tender without feeling mushy, and the tomato flavor helped cut through the rich cream in the sauce.

The conclusion to our meal was no less pleasing. I ordered the *sogno di cioccolata* (\$5.49), a fudge brownie with Kahlua and topped with chocolate mousse, whipped cream and a heaven-sent chocolate sauce that tasted like fudge sundae sauce. While it may sound like a potential chocolate overload, it was not. It was a wonderful symphony of chocolate flavors, one of the best desserts I've had from a chain restaurant.

Carrabba's Italian Grill serves a variety of pastas, entrees, wood-fired pizzas, salads and antipasti. A children's menu, not featured on the paper take-home menu, is available at the restaurant at your request.

The Creve Coeur location is open from 4 to 10 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 4 to 11 p.m. Friday, 3 to 11 p.m. Saturday and 3 to 10 p.m. Sunday.

BY MARIE ETHEN

You'll find good food and lots of it at Carrabba's

BY SUZANNE FAIRBANK
sfairbank@dailypress.com | 247-4773

NEWPORT NEWS

Carrabba's Italian Grill is one of a bumper crop of restaurants to recently sprout up on the Peninsula and the locals are eating it up. Come dinnertime, the parking lot packs with people ready to indulge in well-prepared fare in an upbeat atmosphere.

The upscale national chain — part of the Outback empire — features an open kitchen where diners can watch the kitchen staff make signature dishes and wood-fired pizzas.

A few wooden booths and high-top tables in the bar area allow for a less-active environment where folks can stay out of the fray.

That's exactly what my husband and I did on Monday.

The family-friendly atmosphere is inviting for groups and couples alike and the attentive wait staff aims to please.

With the heaping helpings of appetizers, entrees and desserts, it's no wonder folks are flocking there.

As soon as we were seated, our server arrived to take drink orders. The commendable wine list offers a variety of reds and whites, with a majority being from Italy.

Beer and specialty drinks, including sangria and an assortment of martinis, are also available.

Our waitress promptly returned with my glass of Ecco Domani Merlot (\$6 glass, \$23 bottle) and Dave's Banfi Reserva Chianti (\$8.50 glass, \$33 bottle), along with a basket of crusty Italian bread and a plate of dipping oil. Seasoned with salt and pepper, oregano, garlic and crushed red pepper, the oil added a fantastic flavor to the warm bread.

On our server's recommendation — and she presented quite a few good ones — we started with the antipasti platter (\$9.99) featuring three items from the appetizer menu.

The platter filled with calamari, bruschetta and mozzarella marinara could easily make a meal for one and is plenty for two people to share. The lightly battered fried calamari had a peppery bite and was great dipped in the marinara, though the chunky tomato sauce could have been hotter. We requested

CARRABBA'S ITALIAN GRILL

FOOD ★★★★★
ATMOSPHERE ★★★★★
SERVICE ★★★★★
(★★★★★ excellent; ★★★★ very good; ★★★ average; ★★ fair; ★ poor)

Address: 12363 Hornsby Lane, Newport News

Phone: 269-4917

Web site: www.carrabbas.com

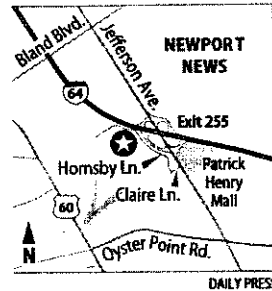
Specialty: Italian

Price range: appetizers \$2.99-\$9.99, entrees \$9.49-\$20.49, desserts \$4.49-\$5.49

Vegetarian options available

Credit cards, checks

Dinner daily



DAILY PRESS

Smoke-free dining

Full bar

Casual atmosphere

Wheelchair accessible

Conversational, but can get loud with a full house

Additional information: Call ahead seating, kids menu

a side of the spicy Italian pepper and lemon butter sauce served with the full order and I highly recommend it. The creamy sauce with pieces of pepperoncini and red pepper had quite a kick.

The mozzarella rectangles, coated with herbed Italian breadcrumbs, were hot and oozing with fresh cheese and were also delicious dipped in the marinara and pepper sauces.

The bruschetta mixture of chopped tomatoes, fresh mozzarella, olive oil, balsamic vinegar and basil was a tasty topping for the grilled Italian bread. The menu mentioned the bread was brushed with olive oil and grilled, but mine tasted saturated.

It was too greasy for me to eat, but Dave found his satisfactory.

The menu has an ample selection of fish, chicken, beef and pasta options as well as nightly specials.

Most meals come with soup or salad — some for an additional \$2.99 — and grilled entrees include an additional side of garlic mashed potatoes, spaghetti, macaroni or vegetable of the day.

Dave decided on the linguine pescatore (\$14.99) from the Italian classics and I ordered the mezzaluna (\$10.99) from the pasta specialties.

His came with a salad — house, Italian or Caesar — and

he chose the house with Parmesan dressing.

The simple mix of greens, carrots, celery, calamata olives and pepperoncini topped with the cheesy cream dressing was acceptable, but after bread and the appetizer, he didn't want to fill up before the main course.

As it was, he still couldn't finish the large bowl of pasta, shrimp, scallops and mussels in a spicy marinara sauce.

The al dente pasta and the tender, succulent seafood rendered a kick with the zesty sauce.

The mezzaluna consists of half-moon ravioli filled with chicken, ricotta cheese and spinach, with a tomato cream sauce.

The flavorful filling worked well in the pasta pockets and was nicely complemented by the savory cream sauce. The oversized serving never seemed to shrink as I nibbled away at the plate of pasta.

An order of tiramisu (\$4.99) was a must for a later treat and it did not disappoint.

The large serving of lady fingers dipped in liqueur laced espresso, layered with sweetened marscapone cheese and topped with Myer's rum and chocolate shavings was delightful and easily took the edge off the old sweet tooth.

Carrabba's creates quality dishes and can easily fill the void when that craving for Italian food comes over you. ■

Dayton City Paper

May 18, 2005

Family Roots

**Carrabba's Italian Grill I pleases palate
With quality ingredients, authentic recipes**

By Daria Schaffnit



CARRABBA'S ITALIAN GRILL

When it comes to restaurant chains, high-quality, fresh ingredients are not necessarily the first things to come to mind, nor is authentic ethnic cuisine. However, at Carrabba's Italian Grill I was pleasantly surprised to find both. Founded in Houston, Texas by an uncle and nephew team of Sicilian descent, Carrabba's has made its way to Washington Township. It's a nice place for a casual dinner with the family or for a romantic evening with your innamorato.

The interior is filled with old black and white family portraits, lively pottery that conjures sunny Tuscany, and bustling servers clad in black and white. The exhibition kitchen, with its wood-fired grill and oven, adds to a feeling of excitement in the air. Service is prompt but unhurried. Your dinner will not arrive just minutes after your appetizer, your server will happily take time to explain menu items or make recommendations, and there is a leisurely feel to the dining experience. When asked about the sangria bianco, one server brought me samples of both the white and the red, which he felt I would enjoy more. With its spicy sweetness, it turned out he was right. The wine list is good, dominated by Italian and California wines.

The antipasti menu is seafood-heavy, featuring calamari, shrimp scampi, crab cakes, and mussels. The fried calamari comes in two forms. Both are lightly battered & fried golden. While the more-common rings are just fine, I couldn't get enough of the tiny whole squid, which was delicately crunchy. The cozze in bianco, starring Prince Edward Island mussels in a lemony wine sauce with a slight licorice taste imparted by pernod, is a superb treat.

While the toppings for the bruschetta change daily and can feature anything from shrimp scampi to caprini cheese and red peppers, this dish has been delicious every time I've ordered it.

Carrabba's mozzarella marinara is a rectangle of fried cheese which manages to avoid the horrifying rubbery texture of many restaurants' mozzarella sticks. The wood-fired pizza is a terrific appetizer when shared. You can create your own, but the pizza margherita, featuring juicy tomatoes rather than sauce, is terrific.

Soup and salad are both available. A meal could be easily be made by pairing a cup of soup with a salad such as the fiorucci. This is a veggie-lover's wonder, incorporating artichoke hearts, grilled eggplant, and roasted red peppers. Atop the whole thing is a hazelnut-studded round of goat cheese. On all salads, the dressing tends to be delicately applied, allowing the natural flavors of the ingredients to be enhanced rather than drowned.

While the Italian classic section of the menu yields good, solid food — the veal marsala and the cannelloni are particularly good — my favorite choices have come from the grill or from the pasta specialties. The spiedino di mare consists of perfectly cooked sea scallops and shrimp, the seasoned breading very light and the lemon butter sauce drizzled judiciously over the top. The pollo Rosa Maria is a delight for cheese lovers. This chicken breast arrives with melting fontina cheese just beginning to peek from inside. Also inside is a generous portion of prosciutto. The dish is finished with a smattering of mushrooms and a lemon basil sauce. The sirloin is good-quality beef and the marsala sauce accents the richness of the meat's flavor perfectly. Another stand-out dish is the mezzaluna, half-moons of paper-thin pasta with a chicken, ricotta, and spinach filling. This comes with just enough tomato cream sauce to enhance the pasta.

All entrées come with soup or salad, as well as soft, warm bread to dip in herb-sprinkled olive oil. Grill items are also served with mashed potatoes (which I find delightful with the marsala

items), the vegetable of the day, spaghetti with classic pomodoro sauce, or cavatappi amatriciana, my favorite, with just enough sauce to stain and flavor the pasta.

For dessert, tiramisù is nicely done at Carrabba's. But, the John Cole dessert is something definitely worth trying. Like a caramel sundae with a twist, this ice cream treat is scattered with rich cinnamon rum pecans. Fruit lovers will enjoy the dessert Rosa, with bananas, pineapple, and strawberries in a sweet pastry cream, all atop a piece of cake. The Kahlúa-laced brownie & mousse confection known as the Chocolate Dream is great, too.

If you choose to dine at Carrabba's Italian Grill, it is located at 900 Miamisburg-Centerville Road in Washington Township. Dinner is served Monday-Thursday from 4:30-10 p.m., Friday from 4:30-11 p.m., Saturday from 3-11 p.m. and Sunday from noon-10 p.m. With no lunch hours, getting a table for dinner can sometimes be difficult. To avoid a long wait, you may want to call to put your name in when you are on your way—or order carry-out. The number is (937) 438-9690.

Carrabba's Italian Grill, 900 Miamisburg-Centerville Road, Washington Township. (937)438-9690. Dinner only. Monday-Thursday 4:30-10, Friday 4:30-11, Saturday 3-11, Sunday noon-10. Offering delicious Italian specialties and good service in a pleasant atmosphere, Carrabba's is a chain restaurant with a personal feel.

*Reach DCP food critic
Daria Schaffnit at
Contactus@daytoncitypaper.com*

TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

www.TALLAHASSEE.com

Scamper in for Carrabba's scrumptious scampi

By Ashby Stiff
SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT

When Carrabba's popped up in Esposito's parking lot, late in the summer of 2000, and front-porch cocktails were being served to huddled masses yearning for a table, we wondered how long the honeymoon would last.

News flash: It's lasted four years and five months. Or until last Friday, at least, when a 5 p.m. arrival found a 20-minute wait for a table. Or Monday, when hostesses were still taking names at 8:30.

We admit to having stared, bemused, on one rainy

restaurant review

opening-week evening, when a porter with an oversized umbrella met arriving passengers curbside and escorted them to that porch.

Where were we, Tallahassee or Central Park South?

Commendable, still, are the pleasant, menu-drilled, wine-indoctrinated servers, neat in khakis, necktie and full-length apron, who are taking care of business — namely you — from drink order to final good evening.

We get a kick out of the lusty Italian birthday greeting, delivered six men strong, as much shouted as sung. It's way *paisano* and a real crowd grabber.

Yes, we've got to hand it to Carrabba's. They've elevated high-volume-chain Italian feeding to an interest level matching that of some double-damask *ristorantes*, and they deliver it to Everyman.

This may or mayn't have been the dream of Johnny Carrabba and Damian Mandola in Houston, circa 1986. Members of a successful restaurant family, and seasoned food men both, they struck out on their own, using the recipes of Damian's mother, Grace, and sister Rose, as well as those garnered from frequent trips to family homes in Italy.

Their restaurant clicked, grew and prospered. So much so that, in 1993, it caught the eye of Outback Steakhouse Inc. An alliance was formed, one that culminated in Outback's acquir-



Address: 2752 Capital Circle N.E.; 297-1100.

Hours: 4 to 10:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday; 4 to 11:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 3 to 10 p.m. Sunday

Payment: Major credit cards are accepted, but checks are not.

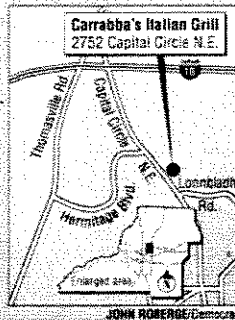
Average tab: \$21.50, dinner and a glass of wine.

Dress code: Casual.

Wheelchair accessible: Yes.

Smoking: On porch, Thursday through Sunday.

Reservations: No.



ing the rights to develop today's more than 168 Carrabba's, nationwide.

The dining spaces are a vastly enlarged and contemporary version of the country Italian *locanda*. Here, dimly lit mixes of wood and brick, tile and vine-draped pergolas create an easy, affable dinner setting.

Seats at the long, exhibition-cooking counter are popular with the pizza and pasta crowd, who like to watch the cooks working at wood-fired grills. We prefer a roomier booth not only to handle all the plates and glasses we collect, but because it's a bit quieter.

One consistent, and legitimate, complaint about Carrabba's is that it can be conversation-killing noisy. Especially on weeknights, at the end of popular happy hour at the bar, when tipplers move on to the tables.

Confidentially, non-workday Saturday and Sunday evenings are quieter.

Dinner starts with delivery of the now-traditional

warmed Tuscan loaf and an herbed-olive-oil dipping sauce said by one source to contain parsley, basil, garlic, thyme, rosemary, crushed red-pepper flakes and a squeeze of lemon juice. We wouldn't swear in court that it contains all of that, but it's a pretty good thing.

The recent cold snap had us hankering for soup, and a prize pair we found in a highly seasoned Italian Sausage and Bean rendition, and in a cabbage-carrot-celery Minestrone that wasn't just another bean soup. A "cup" of either (\$2.99) brings a hearty plateful. And, at \$4.49, a "bowl" trots out who knows what? A tureen?

Other first-course options can be as seductive as Cozze in Bianco (\$9.49) wherein fresh Prince Edward Island mussels come steamed in white wine, basil, lemon butter and Pernod. Or Calamari Ricardo (\$6.99) with its spicy Italian pepper and lemon-butter sauce.

A particular favorite of

■ **What's cooking?:** If you have culinary news, send information to Ashby Stiff (e-mail: dining@ashbystiff.com, or fax: 386-1997) or Zilpha Underwood, Democrat features editor (e-mail: zunderwood@tallahassee.com).

■ **On the Web:** Look for restaurant listings and reviews, plus maps and directions to the restaurants, at www.tallahassee.com/entertainment.

■ **Gourmet Guide:** Consult the restaurant listings on **Page 28**.

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mushroom sauce, shrimp and scallops — turn up in several guises for \$12.99 to \$19.99.

Pastas appear in a variety of shapes and sauces, enhanced with chicken or seafood or both. One really A-list choice is Lobster Ravioli (\$15.49) in which sweetly fresh-flavored Maine lobster fills pasta medallions served with white-wine cream sauce and chopped tomato. We think you'll dote on it. Our dinner bud does.

Alas, poor lengthwise-sliced, tri-layered Eggplant Parmesan is one of Carrabba's lesser efforts. Too thick, too flavorless, too little cheese, too-frail *pomodoro* sauce.

But then, who's perfect?

South Florida Sun-Sentinel

SUNDAY | AUGUST 22, 2004

PALM BEACH COUNTY EDITION

28

WWW.SUN-SENTINEL.COM

Carrabba's Italian Grill/Pompano Beach

JUDITH STOCKS

FINE DINING

Carrabba's is one of America's savvy chains, one that steps beyond the genre's bland conformity of sameness into an industry segment that embraces quality and creativity.

Credit goes to two food-passionate Sicilians from Texas, Johnny Carrabba and Damian Mandola, who opened the first Carrabba's in Houston in 1986. You can almost feel their joy for eating as you rip into hot, good Italian bread for a dip into a golden pool of herbed olive oil. Each swipe brings up vibrancy from rosemary, basil, thyme, red pepper and garlic.

Olfactory pleasures make spooning into homemade soups (\$2.99 cup; \$4.49 bowl) just as memorable. The sausage/lentil is textured by firm lentils and spicy fennel sausage, the pasta fagioli is terrific and minestrone, with 24 fresh ingredients, is served the day

after it's made so flavors can marry. Always tender fried calamari wears a delicate plain crunchy batter or, Ricardo style, it's fried in batter, drizzled with spicy Italian pepper/lemon butter sauce (\$6.99 each).

House pizzas are light, with delicious thin crusts. The Italian chicken pizza (\$8.99) is a six-slicer you'll want all to yourself. Pieces of grilled chicken breast, pine nuts, scalions, romano, fontina and mozzarella cheese are added along with a mesmerizing Italian-style tomatoey sweet and sour sauce.

Carrabba's excels at Prince Edward Island mussels (\$9.49). Have them as an appetizer, snack or dinner, they're always meaty and masterfully steamed in white wine, fresh basil and lemon butter, splashed with pernod. The rest of the menu sparkles with regular specialties and evening features. Lasagna (\$10.99) with house-made meat sauce is good basic stuff,

★★★ ½

Cuisine: Italian

1299 S. Federal Highway

Pompano Beach

954-782-2688

www.carrabbas.com

Cost: inexpensive to moderate

Credit cards: AC

Hours: dinner daily

Reservations: not accepted

Bar: full service

Sound level: moderate

Smoking: prohibited

Children's facilities: boosters, high chairs

Wheelchair accessible: yes

★ **Poor** ★★ **Fair**

★★★ **Good** ★★★★ **Excellent**

as is eggplant parmesan (\$11.79), or just plain old spaghetti with meatballs or Italian sausage (\$10.99).

But, the restaurant really shines when it comes to wood-grilled items and pastas. Cham-

pagne chicken (\$15.99), sauteed boneless breast, goes up-town with the addition of a jumbo lump crabmeat and a memorable champagne cream sauce.

Other chicken dishes begin with fire-roasted chicken breast. Chicken Bryan has caprino cheese and sundried tomatoes in yummy basil lemon butter sauce and the combination of mushrooms, prosciutto and a satisfying marsala sauce equals a good chicken marsala (\$14.79).

Or, have marsala sauce over expertly prepared 11 oz. center-cut tender sirloin (\$16.79), and, when available, on two 8 oz. center-cut pork chops (\$17.99). Fresh fish is as good here as in higher-priced spots — maybe better. It's hard to find salmon so expertly grilled, highlighted by fresh tomato salsa hinted with mint (\$15.99).

Trout, lightly breaded and grilled, is capped by sea scallops, capers and bell peppers, finished with buttery lemon

sauce (\$19.99). All the pasta dishes are good, especially rigatoni marino (\$11.99), tossed with grilled chicken, sauteed mushrooms and sundried tomatoes in creamy tomato sauce topped with ricotta salata and scallions.

Desserts rate higher than average, too. The Rosa (\$4.49) is delicate butter cake layered with pastry cream, fresh banana slices, strawberries, pineapple and real whipped cream. Chocolate dream (\$4.99), a chewy Kahlua-infused fudge brownie, is paved with chocolate mousse, and even a scoop of vanilla ice cream (\$3.99) is accessorized with caramel sauce and roasted cinnamon rum pecans.

If you would like to contact dining correspondent Judith Stocks, e-mail her at judithstocksreviews@yahoo.com or write to her in care of the Sun-Sentinel.

Mystery Muncher

A Sicilian newcomer knows how to win people's hearts

It's a shame Grace Carrabba can't be cloned. But when you're 86, it's tough enough to run one kitchen five days a week — much less a whole chain of them.

Fortunately, Carrabba's Sicilian recipes are in good hands, as her namesake restaurants, Carrabba's Italian Grill, continue to creep across the nation.

Founded by Grace's son and grandson — two self-proclaimed "big Sicilian boys from Texas" — Carrabba's made a big splash in the Lone Star State and quickly spread, reaching Pennsylvania in November. Both locations — in West Chester and Springfield, Delaware County — are going like gangbusters.

Recent visits showed why: Carrabba's takes good care of people. The service and surroundings are warm, and the food is excellent: a notch up the scale from, say, Olive Garden, with prices to match. (Most entrees, including entree-sized salads, range from \$10 to \$16.)

The Dep broke from her low-carb life to indulge in a Margheri-

ta Pizza. Worth falling off the wagon for: thick fresh slices of Roma tomatoes and fresh basil to season the crispy, thick crust — and a steal at \$7.99.

Signore never met a shrimp he didn't like and made straight for the Scampi Damian (named for one of the founders): a generous portion of shrimp sautéed with garlic, white wine, herbs and lemon butter, served over linguine (\$13.49). *Bene!*

Bambini are in good hands at Carrabba's, with their own menu and all-important coloring equipment. Chicken Fingers Charlie and Pizza Pete found just what they needed, including a beverage, for less than \$5. And Charlie scarcely made a dent in his chicken (with a penne side) before surrendering.

If Carrabba's has a downside, it's the restaurant's popularity. The West Chester location was quite noisy, and the Springfield location seems to have a permanent line outside. And the pagers given to waiting diners do not work inside the Springfield mall, making

Carrabba's Italian Grill

1250 Baltimore Pike
(Springfield Shopping Center),
Springfield, Delaware County,
610-544-0517

102 Painters Crossing, West
Chester, 610-358-0156

Hours: 2 to 9:30 p.m.
Sunday. 4 to 10:30 p.m.
Monday through Thursday,
4 to 11 p.m. Friday. 3 to 11
p.m. Saturday

Smoking at bar
Wheelchair-accessible

Specialties: Lobster ravioli
(\$14.99), Pollo Rosa Maria
(\$14.99), and Spiedino Di
Mare (\$15.99).

The line: A neighborhood
spot.

We call it: This bustling
Sicilian newcomer has
become a justifiably popular
spot. Come at off hours, or
be prepared for a wait.

it impossible to wander while you wait. A different system (or new pagers) would help both business and patrons. In the meantime, it pays to be an early bird.

NORTH SHORE

VOL., 26, NO. 1 November 16, 2003

SUNDAY

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JOY OF EATING

BY BILL WOOLEY

Carrabba's: This chain is pure gold

The bread wasn't warm. There. Just thought I'd get the only less-than-satisfying part of my recent dinner at Carrabba's Italian Grill out of the way at the beginning.

Now, the only disappointment I have to digest is my own reluctance to have tried the place earlier. I'll admit it: Route 1 in Peabody is not the first place my mind meanders to when I'm thinking about going out to eat. And isn't it an unspoken rule that you avoid restaurants planted on the same property as hotels? They're just convenient traps for desperate overnight guests, right?

Well, Carrabba's is right next to the Holiday Inn on the northbound side of Route 1, just before the exit for Route 128. Moreover, it lacks the highway's typical sign-on-steroids approach to announcing its presence, leaving gigantic green cactuses, orange dinosaurs and golden bananas to its older neighbors.

Not wanting to squander the time and anxiety of navigating all the necessary vehicular loops to get to Carrabba's, I first checked to see if the place had a Web site. At carrabbas.com, I learned the Peabody location is one of more than 100 restaurants, sprinkled like parmesan across the countryside, vying to become the godfather of Italian "mangia, mangia" chains.

The founders are Johnny Carrabba and Damian Mandola, a couple of Sicilians whose great-grandparents came to America in the early 1900s and settled in that magnet for Mediterranean immigrants - Bryan, Texas (?). In 1986, the pair opened the first Carrabba's in Houston, which was successful enough, by 1993, to prompt the owners of Outback Steakhouse to propose a partnership.

With that boost, Carrabba's went nationwide and reached Peabody a couple of years ago. Carrabba and Mandola have since written a pair of cookbooks, "Ciao Y'all" and "Ciao Sicilia," and have their own cooking show, "Cucina Sicilia," on PBS. After checking out their online menu one Saturday night, I figured it was worth the trip.

I pulled into the parking lot, still assuming, however, the only other

■ JUST THE FACTS

Carrabba's Italian Grill

1A Newbury St.,
Peabody
978-535-3600

Hours: Monday through Thursday, 4 to 10 p.m.; Friday, 4 to 11 p.m.; Saturday, 3 to 11 p.m.; and Sunday, 3 to 9 p.m.

Price: \$10 to \$20.

Liquor: Full bar; well-rounded wine list; \$19 to 40 a bottle.

Handicapped accessible: Yes.
Payment: All major credit cards accepted.

Reservations: Not accepted, but call-ahead seating is offered. Anticipate significant weekend waits.

patrons would be a few Holiday Inn guests — haggard business trippers and, maybe, some sorry Tennessee tourists who thought it would be a great idea to visit Salem for Halloween. Hey, I've been wrong before. Fact is, determined diners were standing around in the parking lot in the middle of what was, I was informed at 7:30 p.m., an 85-minute wait.

Since my stomach was a little too impatient for that, I pulled back out of the parking lot, shaking my head in disbelief, and returned on a Thursday night (it was still surprisingly busy) to finally find out what I'd been missing. Prepared for restaurant personnel's typical treatment of solo diners, which usually makes me feel only slightly more welcome than a leper, I was surprised when my server, Yana, approached me with a warm smile and pleasantly plopped herself down at my table to talk to me about the menu.

By the end of my meal, it was apparent that she was the rule, rather than the exception. Either she and her coworkers were genuinely enjoying their work, or were slipped some kind of happy-making medication before going on shift. After touring the menu with Yana, I opted for a chicken trio (\$17.99), which was not on the menu but offered me chance

to try three signature dishes - chicken Bryan (with caprino cheese and sun-dried tomatoes), pollo Rosa Maria (with fontina cheese, prosciutto and mushrooms), and chicken Marsala (with mushrooms and prosciutto)

A salad, served with one of three homemade dressings (vinaigrette, creamy parmesan or Caesar), and a side of pasta came with the meal, as did the aforementioned bread, with a dipping plate of olive oil and a bend of Italian herbs. A sipped glass of Trincherio Family cabernet sauvignon (\$8) was as warming as the grapevine-laced ceiling, green and terra cotta-colored decor, and sepia-toned family photos, making me more than happy I'd made the trip.

Since there's only so much one man can eat — at least a guy who's more Mayflower than Mediterranean when it comes to appetite — I placed a carryout order of wood-fired pizza with Italian fennel sausage (\$8.99) at the end of my meal. I also took away an order of lasagna ("a house favorite, just like mama used to make," although my mama never did) and an accompanying cup of minestrone soup (\$11.99) as well as some tiramisu (\$4.99) for dessert.

It took me entire week to complete my sampling of Carrabba's cuisine, and it still left me craving more. Each chicken dish provided an explosion of taste bud-titillating flavor. The pizza, although cheated by my later re-heating, was excellent. And the lasagna was, well, something I wish my mama had made.

Oh, and the tiramisu, liberally laced with rum and espresso liqueur, was worth every bit of the 15 hours at the gym it's going to take me to work it off. Next time, I'm going to try the tenderloin filet fiorentina (\$18.99), or the potato-crust sea bass (\$16.99) or maybe the lobster ravioli (\$14.99). No, make that the chicken parmesan (\$14.99).

OK, Uncle. I'm gaining weight just thinking about the possibilities. Suffice it to say, now that I've found Carrabba's, I'll be making more than one return trip.

A Sicilian in TEXAS

Carrabba's Damian Mandola creates rustic Italian food with a Texan's focus on the center of the plate.

BY MONICA ROGERS

SNAPSHOT

CONCEPT

Carrabba's Italian Grill

OWNERSHIP

Outback Steakhouse Inc.

HEADQUARTERS

Tampa, Fla.

2003

SYSTEMWIDE SALES

\$397 million*

AVERAGE

UNIT VOLUME

\$3.1 million

AVERAGE CHECK

\$20

UNITS

133

EXPANSION PLANS

15 by year-end;

25 in 2004

*Chain Leader estimate

Carrabba's Italian Grill co-founder Damian Mandola says Italian food is not just about red sauce and garlic.

Damian Mandola would be the first to tell you he's not a "real" chef. "I'm just a big Sicilian boy from Texas who loves to cook and eat," he says. And it's true: Mandola, co-creator of 133-unit Carrabba's Italian Grill, didn't go to culinary school. He learned many of the recipes for the largely Southern Italian fare he whips up on the PBS series *Cucina Sicilia* and serves at Carrabba's from watching his mother, grandmothers, aunts and uncles.

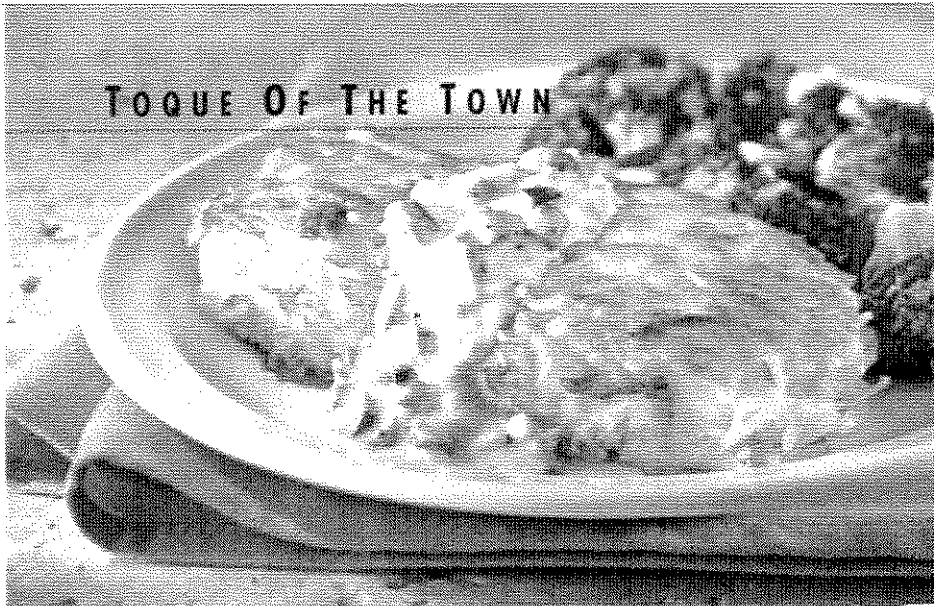
Carrabba's best-selling pasta dish, Spaghetti with Meatballs, \$10.99, traces back to Mandola's Grandma Rosa Testa, who brought the recipe to Houston from near Palermo, Italy. His Eggplant Parmesan—

lightly fried with seasoned bread crumbs and Romano cheese, baked with basil and pomodoro sauce, \$10.99—comes from Grandma Margaret Mandola. Lasagna with Meat Sauce, \$10.99, was a Mama Grace Mandola recipe. And the garlic and fennel sausage used in a variety of dishes came from his nephew's Great-Grandmother Bessie Palazzo.

"I still remember waking up to see grandma's pasta, which had been rolled out by hand, cut and hung to dry over a sterilized broomstick," Mandola recalls. On Saturdays, his mother's kitchen was filled with the scent of fresh bread, garlic, onion and basil "as mama prepared for Sunday lunch when everyone would come over," he says.

What Mandola doesn't volunteer is that he travels to the Mediterranean several times a year looking for recipes and ideas.

TOQUE OF THE TOWN



MENU SAMPLER

ANTIPASTI

Crab Cakes: jumbo lump crabmeat, seared in a cast-iron skillet and served over roasted red bell pepper sauce, \$9.99

Bruschette Caprino: grilled bread brushed with extra virgin olive oil, served with goat cheese, toasted hazelnuts and roasted red bell pepper sauce, \$6.79

GRILL SPECIALTIES

Potato-Crusted Sea Bass, pan-seared and topped with diced tomatoes and a light mustard cream sauce, \$18.99

Pollo Rosa Maria: fire-roasted chicken breast stuffed with fontina cheese and prosciutto, topped with mushrooms and basil-lemon butter sauce, \$14.99



ITALIAN CLASSICS

Spaghetti with meat sauce, meatballs or Italian fennel sausage, \$10.99

DOLCE

Sogno di Cioccolata: fudge brownie brushed with coffee liqueur and topped with chocolate mousse, whipped cream and chocolate sauce, \$4.99

Carrabba's top-selling dishes come from the grill section of the menu.

grilled meats and fish, with Carrabba and Mandola family comfort classics rounding out the bill of fare. Andi Jacobs, vice president of marketing and advertising, says Carrabba's top-selling dishes—Chicken Parmesan, Chicken Marsala, Chicken Bryan, Pollo Rosa Maria and the Grilled Fish of the Day—come from the grill section. "Of the guests who order entrees, approximately one-third choose from the grill section," Jacobs explains.

While Carrabba's is constantly working on potential new dishes, any changes to the core menu are "very slow and deliberate—never faddish," says Mandola. "We're careful to keep the focus on center-of-the-plate items with classic roots and never rush to market with something trendy."

A recent September tasting with management and purveyors, for example, included "about 30 potential entree items, all of them center-of-the-plate dishes," Mandola says. "We do offer pasta selections, but our guests really like it when we put a sauce with a steak or chicken dish."

This strategy is very much in keeping with parent company Outback's formula, says Mark Sheridan, a New Orleans-based restaurant analyst with Johnson Rice. "Outback has the highest cost of goods

Carrabba's pairs potato-crust sea bass (top l.) with a light Pommery mustard cream sauce and tomatoes.

In the Cajun tradition, Crab Cakes (top r.) are pan-seared with spices and served with sweet red-pepper sauce.

An Italian-restaurant classic, Fried Calamari is still a good seller from the Antipasti menu.

"He's well-traveled, well-read and really knows what's going on in the industry," says Steve Shlemon, Carrabba's president. "His down-to-earth passion for quality ingredients, food and service is infectious, drawing loyal clientele and giving Carrabba's heart and soul."

Center Stage

Mandola and his nephew, Johnny Carrabba, founded the concept in 1986. It had just two units when Outback Steakhouse Inc. purchased it in 1993. Since then, it's grown to 133 units, with plans for 15 new stores by year-end and 20 to 25 in 2004.

The menu centers on large portions of



"I always liked pairing sun-dried tomatoes with goat cheese," Mandola says. His best-selling dish, Chicken Bryan, adds that combo to a grilled chicken breast and white-wine butter sauce.

Sheridan says Carrabba's center-of-the-plate focus distinguishes the chain from other Italian concepts. Carrabba's food cost comes in at 32 percent—high for an Italian concept—“because they're putting more protein on the plate compared with the average Italian chain, which serves a lot of

Food costs run about 32 percent—high for a casual-dining Italian concept.

sold in the industry, which means they invest more in the food. They're a company very focused on giving value," he says. "They define that by giving the customer higher quality ingredients, executed well."

pasta and has food costs in the mid-20s. While the percentage of profit for each dish might not be that great, the dollar profit will be higher as customers recognize value and push volumes up," he says.

Slow and Careful

Typically, Carrabba's introduces new items via daily specials. Items that sell particularly well may move to the core menu, which is reprinted three times a year.

Each of the chain's four newest dishes were in development for about a year. A fifth—lobster ravioli—is still being tested. Salmon Piatto Bruno, pan-seared salmon served over roasted vegetables in a crock

(\$15.99 or \$16.99, depending on location), moved onto main menus in February. The dish garners about 2 to 3 percent of sales in its category and took nine months to develop. In February Mandola also introduced Potato-Crusted Sea Bass, pan-seared and topped with diced tomatoes and a light mustard cream sauce, \$18.99, after a year in development. It represents 3 to 4 percent of grill entree sales.

Two new appetizers also made the cut. Crab Cakes made with jumbo lump crabmeat, seared in a cast-iron skillet and served over roasted red bell pepper sauce, \$9.99, is a best seller, representing 7 to 8 percent of appetizer sales. Initially introduced in March 2002, the dish has been gradually added to stores since. Carrabba's Bruschette of the Day, grilled garlic toast with a variety of toppings, made the menu in February, also selling at 7 to 8 percent.

"There's really no method to the madness of where these new dishes come from," Mandola says. "Sometimes I eat something somewhere and it strikes a chord. Other times I read about something or see an interesting idea when I'm traveling."

Inspiration for the sea bass came from Chef Mark Holly of Pesce's, the fine-dining seafood restaurant Mandola operates with Carrabba in Houston. "Mark does a potato-crusted sea bass with a Jack Daniel's cream sauce there that's phenomenal," Mandola says. "So I worked with him a little bit, and using some of the ingredients we had in our inventory at Carrabba's, such as this

The Salmon Piatto Bruno was Damian Mandola's answer to customer requests for a healthful salmon dish.

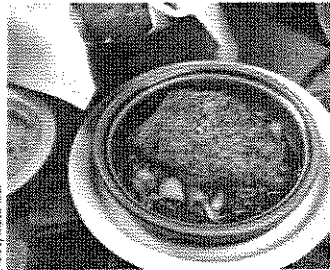


Photo by Andrew White

Following his Sicilian ancestors' lead, Mandola doesn't use a heavy batter in his Eggplant Parmesan. "Frying it with bread crumbs for a little crunch results in a much lighter-tasting dish," he says.

"Real Italian food is rustic, hearty, not gussied up." —Chef Damian Mandola

nice, Pommery-style mustard and diced tomatoes, came up with a new version."

Salmon Piatto Bruno was Mandola's answer to requests for a healthful salmon dish. "I love rustic, roasted vegetables—they're so flavorful. For this dish, we put them with a nice piece of roasted fish in a pretty terra-cotta pot," he explains. "Everybody fell in love with it. It's healthy and delicious, and the presentation is nice."

Real Italian? Rustic

Mandola's affinity for rustic fare is long-standing. "Real Italian food is rustic, hearty, not gussied up. It's what I was raised up eating. It's what I learned from books by

Italian cooking masters that inspired me the most—Giuliano Bugialli and Marcella Hazan. And it's what I see when I travel to Sicily," he says.

Mandola first came across Bugialli and Hazan in the '70s. "In my mind, those were the two responsible for bringing Italian food out of the red-sauce-and-melted-mozzarella mindset," he says. "I really embraced their philosophy that Italian food is not just about how much garlic you put in. It's all about freshness and quality of ingredients—respecting ingredients."

Keeping things fresh today, Mandola's travels to the Mediterranean continue to yield new menu ideas. Carrabba's new

Bruschette of the Day was largely inspired by the toppings Mandola saw while traveling with Joel Barker, Carrabba's research and development chef and national food technician. "We'd had bruschette on our menu for years but were always looking for ways to make it better," Barker explains. "In Spain and Sicily, we saw people topping bruschette with everything from fresh tomatoes and basil to grilled sirloin and swordfish."

On return, the pair developed toppings that unit operators could rotate daily. Varieties include Bruschette Checca with fresh mozzarella, Roma tomatoes, herbs and balsamic vinegar; Bruschette con Pesto with Roma tomatoes, pine-nut pesto, ricotta cheese that has been pressed and drained, and basil; and Bruschette Caprino with goat cheese, toasted hazelnuts and roasted red bell pepper sauce.

Unit cooks also submit new recipe ideas, such as the Trout Nicola special, fresh trout breaded with toasted bread crumbs and hazelnuts, grilled and served with basil-lemon butter and tomatoes.

"In reality, our menu is a group effort," Mandola says. "We all travel a lot and you never know when something will turn up."

Mandola also tries to keep a finger on the customers' pulse. "It has to come from our people talking to our guests," he says. "Not from comment cards. If you're close to your business, you don't need comment cards. Those are for someone sitting up in an office somewhere that's separate from the business." □



Mezzaluna ravioli is stuffed with chicken, ricotta and spinach and served in tomato cream sauce.

Detroit Free Press

FRIDAY
Jan. 10,
2003

Warm bread on arrival promises a good meal

By CASSANDRA SPRATLING
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Warm bread is always a good sign. It's an indication that the people running the restaurant pay attention to details and it whets my appetite for more good things to come.

Carrabba's Italian Grill does not disappoint.

During two visits to the Canton location service was excellent, the atmosphere lively, yet warm and inviting, and, best of all, the food was delicious.

The most difficult challenge was making a selection from the wide variety of freshly prepared entrees.

The freshness was evident in the flavors of the food. Even the mozzarella marinara (cheese sticks on a less ambitious menu) are hand-made on site daily using fresh slices of whole milk mozzarella, coated with Italian bread crumbs and lightly fried.

Carrabba's metro Detroit restaurants opened in November. But the first Carrabba's opened in Houston in 1986 when Johnny Carrabba joined with a restaurateur buddy, Damian Mandola, and turned family recipes into a chain.

Even though it's a chain — which joined the Outback Steak House family in 1993 — you don't get that canned, mass-produced feeling or taste.

There are now 120 restaurants nationwide.

Among the tempting offerings are a variety of grilled entrees, several pasta specialties and some classic Italian dishes, including lasagna that boasts of being a house favorite.

There are also a few daily specials, including a fresh fish of the day. There's no way to say there's not enough to choose from here.

On the first visit, I invited a friend of Italian heritage, thinking it wise to have the viewpoint of a woman who knows the authentic cuisine of Italy. It wasn't as good as her mama's, my friend said, but then again, nothing is. Her mama would have approved of the place, she added.

My friend ordered Filet Fiorentina (beef tenderloin) medium, but it came medium rare, which she discovered she liked even better.

The hit of the evening was the Cozze in Bianco, fresh mussels steamed in white wine, basil, lemon butter and Pernod. The sauce tasted so good the waiter said some people dip the bread in it. After trying that ourselves, we understood why.

The fish of the day, during both visits, was the grilled salmon topped with a tomato basil vinaigrette at \$15.99. It was cooked just right, with a light moist flaky texture and a mellow taste.

The accompaniment with one dish, fettuccine Alfredo, was the only disappointment of the evening. It felt and tasted sticky.

The second visit proved to be as enjoyable as the first.

My 10-year-old daughter prides herself in being a pizza connoisseur, and she declared the sausage pizza perfect (\$8.99). The zesty handmade sausage is from a special family recipe that owners say only one family member, John Carrabba Sr., knows.

The only problem was that for some unexplained reason her pizza arrived many minutes after everyone else's entree. An apology was offered.

Another hit of the evening was the eggplant parmesan (\$10.99). A friend said it was among the best she'd ever had — not too mushy, as it can get, and quite flavorful.

In fact, all of the food was tasty, from the crispy calamari appetizer (\$6.99), though one person found it over-breaded, to the sogno di cioccolata (\$4.99), which my Italian-American friend said was not truly an Italian dessert but an American dish given an Italian name.

No matter. The rich fudge brownie, brushed with Kahlua, chocolate mousse and chocolate sauce would put any chocolate lover in chocolate heaven. And the dessert that is Italian, tiramisu, she and her husband found delightful, though too heavy on the whipped cream.

We didn't order the lasagna, but during the second visit, our waiter surprised us with a taste of it. We couldn't have possibly looked hungry after the hefty portions, but he said he had a little left over that we could take home. One bite proved why the \$10.99 dish is a house favorite. The layers of noodles, meat sauce and cheese blend into a richly flavored casserole. Even my pizza-loving daughter said she'd order it next time.

All Italian classic and grilled dishes come with a choice of soup or salad — house, Italian or Caesar. If it's not included in the meal, the soup or salad costs an extra \$2.79. At each visit, we found the salads as crisp and as tasty as fresh-from-the-garden vegetables. Dressings are housemade.

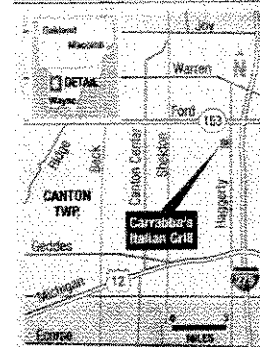
And, this is a first for me, one of the nicest treats is in the rest room: tapes that guests can listen to and learn a little Italian.

Bravissimo!



GARY MALGRDA/Special to the Free Press

Behind a plate featuring Filet Fiorentina, Matt August makes another dinner.



Copyright Free Press

CARRABBA'S ITALIAN GRILL

1900 N. Haggerty Road, Canton
734-844-7800
5pm
43450 West Oaks Drive, Novi
248-735-0409

FARE: Excellent variety of delicious, fresh-made Italian cuisine, including grilled entrees, pasta specialties and Italian classics such as eggplant parmesan, spaghetti and the lasagna, which is a house favorite. All items are fresh. A delicious recipe for kids 10 and under offers meals for \$4.49.

ATMOSPHERE: Vintage and contemporary photos of Carrabba family members and friends, wood accents and bright, colorful marble-like table tops add to the lively yet warm and inviting atmosphere in the restaurants that seat 243 people.

PRICE: \$\$ All major credit cards accepted.

SERVICE: Service is fast and friendly, almost too fast. One gets the impression that the waitstaff has been taught to get people in and out, which may be a good thing since the later you go the more likely you'll be waiting by the door for a table among the many who've apparently already heard about the good food inside.

HOURS: 4-10 p.m. Mon.-Thu. 4-11 p.m. Fri.-3-11 p.m. Sat. 1-9 p.m. Sun.

NOTE: No reservations accepted. But you can call ahead and get your name on the waiting list when you're on your way. Or if you can't stick around, try the carry-out. Call the order in and a member of the waitstaff brings the dinner to your vehicle. Just be sure to park near the carry-out door. There's a menu on the Web at www.carrabba.com.

FOOD

Cooking and Comment

Favorite Recipe, 2F
What's Cooking, 4F
Couponing, 4F

Lights!



Johnny Carrubba, left, and Damian Manziola combine Texas twang and good humor with Italian food as hosts of the PBS cooking show *Cucina Amore*.

Cameras! Accents!

Houston's hungry boys cook twangy Italian on PBS

By JOHN DeMERS / Houston Chronicle Food Editor

THE opening sequence rolls on television across America. Ah, it's *Cucina Amore*, that Italian cooking show. The one that made Nick Stellino a foosie celeb for three seasons.

If memory doesn't quite serve, there are other more-or-less subtle cues: Italian music, Italian food, two guys so well fed and bounteous that, even as mere images under theme music, they must be Italian, too.

With their love-of-life meters set on overdrive, the two debating hosts at last welcome their audience — speaking about Italian food through nothing less than the yellow "nose" of Texas. *Momo mio, it's a twang!*

"This Italian guy called me from Brooklyn once," Damian Manziola recalls over sausage and peppers, fried calamari and pizza margherita washed down with red wine at Carrabba's on Kirby. "And he just couldn't believe it. He says to me, 'I never heard Italian with a Texas accent before.' So I say right back, 'I never heard Italian with a Brooklyn accent before.'"

See PBS on Page 2F.



John DeMERS

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Both Mandola, who combines the impishness of a Sicilian Friar Tuck with the bemused grin of Zero Mostel in *The Producers*, and his restaurant partner, TV straight man and blood nephew, Johnny Carrabba, say the sheer weirdness of an Italian cooking show with a Texas accent was what brought the Public Broadcasting Service and the *Cucina* production company around.

"Well, they were looking for a change," Carrabba shrugs, as usual chiming in less comfortably than the tirelessly upbeat Mandola.

"Yeah," Mandola promotes, playing for this audience of one. "And I'm always the optimist. He's always the pessimist."

"At least," Carrabba fires back, "yeah, at least I didn't go seven figures over budget on our new restaurant."

"So I wanted a little marble . . ."

"A little?"

And they're off, without cameras or booms or gaffers or best boys. Doing another spirited episode of *Cucina Amore*, whose 26 laped episodes start running April 7 on PBS stations across America. Locally, the show won't turn up on KUHT until April 21, running each Saturday at 11:30 a.m.

The "interview" with Houston's soon-to-be-best-known eaters is a foodie Rolling Thunder Tour, starting at one of two Carrabba's restaurants the pair owns outright, with nine more split 50/50 with their big-bucks partners at Outback Steakhouse. A full 60 additional Carrabba's Italian Grills are owned and operated by Outback, with unquestionably more to come.

Still, after a "few bites" at Carrabba's — even a mountain of delicious Italian sausage weighs in as a "few bites" with these guys — it's time to continue eating and talking, several links up the food chain.

If Carrabba's is as boisterous and unassuming as its founders, plus entirely kid-friendly, Pesce, a brisk stroll away, is a glistening

Italianate Oz for seafood lovers everywhere. Mandola's "little marble" sets the tone, but Pesce is also a wonderland of open kitchen, bustling food bar, copper pots and walls of wine.

A big entrance by the "Carrabba's Boys" means 12-15 parties requiring a visit immediately, so the already-full interviewer is consigned to executive chef Mark Holley, a tall, eloquent and purposeful man from Ohio with training in New Orleans by the Brennan family.

The tour goes behind the scenes, to numberless clean, well-lit places created to receive, store and prepare food. By the time the walk winds down, Mandola and Carrabba are finished table-hopping. Or maybe it's time to talk. Or maybe it's just time to eat.

Another California red is paired with the seafood martini with Korean kimchee sauce, gumbo, lobster bisque and a delicious Mediterranean fish called branzino (famed *loup de mer*, sea wolf, in French) with cannellini beans. Plus *lemon meringue pie*. Plus a banana split worthy of the 1950s.

"Everybody said it wouldn't work in a place like this, that nobody would ever order it," gloats Mandola, drawing back a piled-berry ice cream and whipped cream. "Now it's one of our best-selling desserts."

"That's right, Big D," says Carrabba.

"And that's why you can't let the CPAs tell you how to make a restaurant."

Ah, that seven-figure faux pas again. Or perhaps it's Mandola's frustration trying to create an upscale Italian food store between Carrabba's and Pesce. Or perhaps . . .

In between bites, more wine and labieside visits by Houston's lawyers, doctors, car dealers and real-estate developers, a family saga emerges in ever-short segments. Mandola was brought up in Houston, immersed in the food, language and culture of a Sicilian family that entered this country (as did so many) through New Orleans.

Some enterprising immigrant made it out of that city's web of butchers, fruit stands and intrigue, sailing west to Galveston. Relatives followed after he wrote

of the promise he saw there, as relatives always seemed to.

"Anytime Sicilians —" Mandola stops to correct himself — "anytime Italians get together, everything is done around the kitchen table, whether it's a happy time or a sad time. For Italians, food IS their culture."

The partners struggle with math for a moment, running through dozens of relatives who own or operate restaurants in the Houston area, only then to calculate how long each of the pair has been in the business. That comes to 26 years for Mandola, going back to plans made with roommates at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, and 20 years for Carrabba.

After separate trips through friends' and relatives' eateries, they opened the first Carrabba's on Kirby together in 1986, expanding to a second location at Woodway and Vess 18 months later. On his own, Mandola opened Darman's *Cucina Italiana*, a restaurant he sold in 1993, as the Outback-funded expansion was taking off.

The opening of Pesce last October was a labor of love — and, of course, money. Seven figures too much money, Carrabba reminds. Adding to the real sense of unreality was a call from a consulting chef for PBS saying the Boys had been recommended for *Cucina Amore* by Saverio editor Colman Andrews, who loved their food whenever he was in Houston.

"It's an honor," Carrabba admits. "PBS is mighty reputable. It's not every day somebody comes and asks you to do a 26-

segment cooking series."

Mandola accuses Carrabba of resisting TV, making Carrabba honor-bound to explain that he and his wife have one baby at home and another on the way. They end up agreeing it was "an offer they couldn't refuse," then laugh raucously at the phrase's association.

The show was behind schedule because of the nationwide host search. So the Boys worked from 8 a.m. till 7 p.m., kicking out episode in Seattle for 10 days straight and then for eight more, with six days off for home.

"There's this warehouse district in Seattle, and there's this big studio with a kitchen, plus back kitchens for prep," Mandola reports. He grins like Zero Mostel again. "They wanted us to rehearse. Johnny and I said, 'Roll the cameras,' and we just started making fools of ourselves."

The "interview" is winding down, as is the wine. As is the banana split. As is the interviewer. Mandola, who spends some time on the show with his mother looking back on food and life, seems suddenly to be looking forward instead.

"You know, I'm 48," he says. "After all this, people are saying I ought to slow down. And sometimes I think maybe they're right. But I still want to do my deli. I still want to do my casual place. I say: Let's do it. Let's do it *all!*"

Carrabba nudges with his elbow, gently, winking. "What are we gonna do with this guy, huh?"

Sugo di Melanzane

- 3/4 cup olive oil
- 1 large onion, minced
- 1/2 cup finely chopped garlic
- 2 ounces tomato paste
- 3 (28-ounce) cans whole tomatoes, chopped
- 3 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- 2 cups julienneed fresh basil leaves
- Salt and black pepper to taste
- 6 Japanese eggplants
- 1/2 cup thinly sliced garlic
- 1 1/2 cups vegetable oil

Prepare Sugo sauce by heating olive oil in large saucepan over medium heat. Add onion and cook 2 minutes. Add chopped garlic and cook another 4-5 minutes, until onions are soft. Add tomato paste and cook 2 minutes, until thick and slightly darkened.

Add tomatoes and cook 20 minutes, stirring frequently. Stir in vinegar, basil, salt and black pepper. Reduce heat to low and simmer about 3 minutes. Set aside.

Make slits in each eggplant with a small knife, going all the way around. Stuff garlic slices in each slit. Heat vegetable oil in a cast iron skillet over high heat. Brown eggplants on all sides. Drain on paper towels.

Place drained eggplants in pan with Sugo sauce. Cook over low heat until soft and tender, 10-15 minutes. Makes 6-8 servings.

Fried Oyster Po-Boy

- 3 to 4 cups vegetable oil for deep frying
- 16 medium oysters, shucked and drained
- 2 to 3 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1 cup cornmeal
- 1 1/4 teaspoons salt
- 3/4 teaspoon black pepper
- 1/4 teaspoon ground red pepper
- 1 (6- to 7-inch) loaf round Italian bread

Preheat at least 1 1/4 inches oil to 350 degrees in heavy 2 quart saucepan. In a bowl, mix oysters and flour until sticky and gummy. In another bowl, combine cornmeal, salt, black pepper and ground red pepper. Coat oysters in seasoned cornmeal, knocking off excess.

Carefully set only 8 oysters in hot oil and fry until golden brown and just cooked through, no more than 1 1/2 minutes. Drain on paper towels. Repeat process with remaining oysters.

To assemble, cut bread in half horizontally. Hollow out a little, removing some of the bread sections of both top and bottom. Arrange fried oysters on bottom half of loaf and set the top on. Press down firmly to adhere ingredients. Cut into 4 wedges and serve immediately. Makes 4 servings.

Steak With Annaghio Sauce

- 1/4 cup peeled garlic cloves
- 1 1/2 teaspoons salt
- 3/4 teaspoon black pepper
- 1/4 cup chopped fresh basil leaves
- 3/8 cup chopped fresh mint leaves
- 1/4 teaspoon dry oregano
- 1/4 cup freshly squeezed lemon juice
- 2 tablespoons white wine vinegar
- 3/4 cup extra virgin olive oil
- 1-inch thick New York strip or porterhouse

Prepare Annaghio (herbed garlic sauce) by placing garlic, salt, pepper, basil, mint and oregano in a mortar and pulverizing with a pestle until mixture forms a paste. Place paste in a glass jar and add lemon juice, vinegar and olive oil. Shake well.

Place the steak on hot grill for 4-5 minutes per side, making criss crossing grill marks halfway through cooking time. For rare, take away 1 minute per side; for well done, add 2 minutes per side. Serve steak with Annaghio sauce. Makes about 4 servings.

Aranzia Sciroppo

- 6 oranges
- 1 large lemon
- 3 cups water, plus more to boil orange peel, divided
- 1 cup plus 3 tablespoons dry white wine, divided
- 1 1/4 cups sugar
- 3 whole cloves
- 3 tablespoons Grand Marnier
- Fresh mint leaves for garnish

Peel oranges and lemon top to bottom, being careful to get peel only and not white pith. Cut peel into very thin julienne. Bring some water to a boil and add peel, boiling for 5 minutes. Drain and transfer to medium-size non-aluminum saucepan. Add the 3 cups water, 1 cup wine, sugar and cloves.

Bring mixture to a boil and cook until syrupy and medium caramel color, 45-50 minutes. Remove from heat and stir in remaining wine and Grand Marnier. Peel away all white pith and arrange oranges in clear serving bowl. Top with orange and lemon rind and pour sauce over top. Garnish with fresh mint. Makes 4-6 servings.

AT YOUR LEISURE

LOCAL TASTES

Carrabba's Worth Its Wait in Savory Italian Flavors

By SUE KOVACH SHUMAN
Washington Post Staff Writer

It's abominable to wait at a restaurant for dinner for an hour and a half. But we did it one recent Saturday night, and we'd do it again.

Many regular customers endure a long wait Fridays and Saturdays at Carrabba's Italian Grill in Woodbridge. It's a good thing the restaurant is at the Center at Rollingwood, because being able to stroll over to Kohl's made our wait less painful.

After standing in Carrabba's foyer for 30 minutes—Carrabba family photos held our interest only so long—we shopped and returned. As we tugged on door handles shaped like chianti bottles, we saw that the restaurant was still crowded. Some people waited with glazed eyes and restless children, others with beer; some with both. There were couples as well as groups of seven, all waiting patiently because no reservations are taken. Most departing diners toted leftovers. A starving young man jokingly said he'd trip one of them to get dinner sooner.

Carrabba's is a sophisticated, high-energy place with amiable staffers in crisp white shirts and ties and long white aprons. We saw several pitch in unbidden to cover for a colleague who slipped on a wet floor and cut her hand. Our waiter, Sean O'Hara, rattled off specials with uncommon ease and an unforced smile. The restaurant was jammed. We were seated at 7:50 p.m. after a 6:30 p.m. arrival. Our server could have hurried us but instead made us feel welcome and relaxed. He's one of Carrabba's best assets.

The 180-seat restaurant is named for Houston restaurateur Johnny Carrabba, who founded the chain in 1986 with his uncle, Damian Mandola. Carrabba's, which has 80 locations, is affiliated with Outback Steakhouse. If you like Outback—or Olive Garden, That's Amore or Tiziano's—you'll enjoy Carrabba's.

Both Outback and Carrabba's have a clubby atmosphere, though Outback feels darker. Decorations at Carrabba's are more Old World. Faux vines painted on columns look real in the dim lighting. A mural along the back wall evokes an Italian villa. The contemporary jazz and classical tunes were at the perfect background volume.

Both Outback and Carrabba's restaurants serve generous portions of consistently well-prepared food. At both, car-side carryout is available. But that way you miss the chance to see waiters serenading birthday celebrants with a rousing Italian version of the song. You also miss watching as many as nine chefs working in the open kitchen, grilling fish, cooking pasta, arranging grilled eggplant atop greens—all choreographed by a manager who posts orders and keeps the show lively.



BY LARRY NOBELKA FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Managing partner Everett Hazlewood and chef Margarita D. Hernandez are among the amicable staffers who energize Carrabba's Italian Grill.

If you like, you can sit at the kitchen counter and watch while you dine. Our booth was near the kitchen but far enough away to allow for quiet conversation. Obviously, much planning went into the acoustics here, for although the restaurant was bustling, you couldn't really hear what diners nearby were saying.

To whet the appetite, meals begin with

a basket of warm, chewy Italian bread and a plate of olive oil, oregano and basil. Dip and savor while you peruse the menu.

Appetizers are substantial; you'll feel you're getting your money's worth. We started with shrimp scampi (\$8.49), eight fresh jumbo shrimp that had been sautéed in white wine and lemon juice. Chunks of white garlic perfumed the

dish, and crusty garlic toast was meant for lapping up every last drop of sauce. In *cozze in bianco*, mussels are transformed into gourmet delicacies steamed in white wine, garlic, olive oil, lemon and basil. Lightly battered *calamari* (squid) is served with spicy marinara sauce, as are breaded mozzarella sticks.

Full dinners cost \$7.99 to \$18.99, with most less than \$15. Minestrone, homemade vegetable soup, is always a choice, as is salad—house, Italian or Caesar. House salad consisted of Romaine lettuce, tomatoes, black olives and a tasty herb, oil and vinegar dressing. Better still was our spicy Sicilian chicken soup, a full-size bowl of chicken, pasta, carrots, potatoes and zucchini. If we didn't know better, we'd swear someone's Sicilian grandmother had cooked it.

The menu includes Italian dishes you'd expect—manicotti, lasagna, spaghetti—all with fresh sauces. Other favorites include chicken and eggplant Parmesan, veal Marsala and veal piccata. There's also hearty *rigatoni campagnolo*, which pairs pasta with Carrabba's special-recipe sausage and

Carrabba's Italian Grill

- **Address:** 13870 Foulger Sq., Woodbridge. 703-583-7300.
- **Hours:** 4-10:30 p.m. Monday-Thursday; 4:30-11:30 p.m. Friday; 2-11:30 p.m. Saturday; noon-10 p.m. Sunday.
- **Credit cards:** Accepts all major cards.
- **Prices:** Soups, salads and appetizers, \$2.69-\$11.99; pizzas, \$8-10; dinners, \$9-19. Our bill for two came to \$50.63, before tip.
- **Children's menu:** \$4.49 or less.
- **Low-fat selections:** Many choices; such salad with roasted peppers and grilled

- eggplant.
- **Health-conscious:** Homemade pastas and sauces, grilled fish.
- **Atmosphere:** Fast-paced, casual.
- **Downside:** Long waits on weekends.
- **Upside:** The food is worth the wait.

Got a Prince William restaurant you'd like to spread the word about? Send e-mail to shumansh@washpost.com or kovachs@erols.com, or mail to: 9420 Battle St., Manassas, Va. 20110.

Delivering on Anticipation

REVIEW, From Page 7

cheeses. Ravioli is a gourmet's dream, stuffed with chicken, ricotta cheese and spinach, then basted in a creamy tomato sauce.

Salads are not boring. There's the familiar chicken Caesar (\$9.49), but also greens with marinated artichoke hearts, roasted peppers, grilled eggplant and hazelnut caprino cheese (\$7.99), or with grilled shrimp and scallops, roasted peppers, olives and ricotta in vinaigrette (\$11.99).

Daily specials tend to be tried-and-true dishes—grilled tenderloin, pork chops in Marsala wine—as well as fresh fish such as rainbow trout. Grilled dishes are served with pasta pomodoro (broiled tomatoes and herbs—ours tasted just-made), fettuccine Alfredo or garlic mashed potatoes. Our ¾-inch thick slice of salmon (\$15.49) arrived adorned with grill marks and juicy throughout. It had been lightly basted with lemon and basil.

We also had a dish recommended by our server: polla Rosa Maria, named after a Carrabba family member. Stuffed inside a roasted chicken breast was melted fontina cheese, a slice of prosciutto and sweet wine sauce—tender and incredibly tasty.

Pizza made on the wood-fire grill is a treat. It doesn't seem fair to call the simple 10-inch Margherita (\$7.99) with tomatoes, olive oil and mozzarella a plain pie. But it is, compared with one of grilled chicken in an Italian sweet-and-sour sauce, laced with pine nuts and scallions and topped with Romano, fontina and mozzarella cheeses (\$8.99). For \$9.99, you can create your own pie.

If the menu choices aren't exactly what you crave or you have special dietary needs, let your server know and the chefs will make it. Managing partner Everett Hazlewood said some customers have a favorite dish, such as a pasta with a special sauce.

A menu for children 10 and younger is a pleaser: spaghetti with meatballs, cheese or pepperoni pizza, chicken fingers, fettuccine Alfredo,



BY LARRY KOBELKA FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

The menu has dishes you'd expect and favorites such as veal Marsala.

with beverage and \$4.49 or less.

Carrabba's wine list consists of about 40 mostly Italian and California choices served by the glass, pitcher or bottle. A glass of very decent house wine is \$4.75; a glass of cabernet sauvignon from Francis Ford Coppola's vineyard is \$8. Bottles cost \$16 to \$36, with about half less than \$25. There's also sangria.

The birthday girl at the table next to us was surprised with a scoop of vanilla ice cream topped with caramel sauce and roasted cinnamon rum pecans (\$3.99, free on your birthday). It's okay to bring your own birthday cake; just call ahead, Hazlewood said.

There's a dessert for every sweet tooth: butter cake topped with bananas, strawberries, pineapple and whipped cream; chocolate-almond cheesecake with raspberry-strawberry puree; fudge brownie with Kahlua, mousse, whipped cream and chocolate sauce; and tiramisu, liqueur-laced espresso over ladyfingers layered with mascarpone cheese, rum and shaved chocolate. No dessert is more than \$4.49.

Espresso, served with a tiny almond biscotti, was the perfect end to our meal. The brew was well-priced (\$2) but needed more strength. There also are two specialty coffees—cappuccino with Bailey's Irish cream or with Godiva chocolate liqueur and amaretto.

From the Grill

All grilled dishes are cooked over our wood-burning grill and come with a cup of our homemade soup or your choice of a House, Italian or Caesar salad. Entrees are also served with your choice of garlic mashed potatoes, spaghetti pomodoro, cavatappi amatriciana or the vegetable of the day.

Grilled Salmon	Always fresh, grilled and finished with the Chef's sauce of the day	15.99
Chicken Bryan	Grilled chicken breast topped with goat cheese, sundried tomatoes and a basil lemon butter sauce	14.99
Chicken Marsala	Grilled chicken breast topped with mushrooms, prosciutto and our Lombardo Marsala wine sauce	14.99
Pollo Rosa Maria	Grilled chicken breast stuffed with fontina cheese and prosciutto, topped with mushrooms and a basil lemon butter sauce	15.49
Spiedino di Mare	Shrimp and sea scallops coated with Italian breadcrumbs, grilled and topped with lemon butter sauce	16.49
Sirloin Marsala	11 oz. USDA Choice center-cut sirloin grilled and topped with mushrooms, prosciutto and our Lombardo Marsala wine sauce	16.99

The following entrees are served with your choice of two side dishes.

Chicken Gratella	Grilled chicken breast basted with olive oil and herbs	13.29
Filet Fiorentina	9 oz. USDA Choice center-cut tenderloin perfectly seasoned and grilled	19.99

Pasta Specialties

Add your choice of a cup of our homemade soup or a House, Italian or Caesar salad for \$2.99.

Rigatoni Martino	Rigatoni tossed with grilled chicken, sautéed mushrooms and sundried tomatoes in our tomato cream sauce topped with ricotta salata cheese and scallions	12.49
Scampi Damian	Shrimp sautéed with garlic, white wine, herbs and lemon butter, served over linguine	13.99
Pasta Weesie	Shrimp sautéed in a garlic, lemon butter, white wine sauce with sautéed mushrooms and scallions, served over fettuccine alfredo	13.99
Lobster Ravioli	Ravioli stuffed with tender Maine lobster in a white wine cream sauce with diced tomatoes	15.99
Tagliarini	Fine pasta in a sauce of crushed tomatoes, garlic, olive oil and basil	8.99
Picchi Pacchii	Add chicken or shrimp	11.99/13.99
Pasta Carrabba	Fettuccine alfredo tossed with grilled chicken, sautéed mushrooms and peas	12.99
Mezzaluna	Delicate half moon ravioli stuffed with chicken, ricotta and spinach in a tomato cream sauce	10.99

Italian Classics

All Italian Classics come with a cup of our homemade soup or your choice of a House, Italian or Caesar salad.

Lasagne	A house favorite, just like mamma used to make	11.49
Eggplant Parmesan	Fresh eggplant layered with basil, mozzarella and romano cheese and baked with pomodoro sauce, served with rigatoni pomodoro	11.99
Linguine Pescatore	Shrimp, scallops and mussels tossed with linguine in a spicy marinara sauce	14.99
Spaghetti	With meat sauce, homemade meatballs or Italian sausage	10.99
Manicotti	Thin sheets of pasta hand-rolled and stuffed with four cheeses, baked with pomodoro sauce and mozzarella	11.49
Chicken Parmesan	Sautéed chicken breast coated with Italian breadcrumbs, topped with pomodoro sauce and melted mozzarella, served with garlic mashed potatoes, spaghetti pomodoro, cavatappi amatriciana or the vegetable of the day	14.99
Veal Marsala	Sautéed veal topped with mushrooms, prosciutto and our Lombardo Marsala	



Antipasti

Calamari	Lightly battered and fried to a tender, crisp, golden brown, served with marinara sauce	7.49
Calamari Ricardo	Our Calamari served with a spicy Italian pepper and lemon butter sauce	7.49
Crab Cakes	Two crab cakes made with jumbo lump crabmeat, seared in a cast iron skillet and served with our roasted red bell pepper sauce	9.99
Antipasti Platter	A delicious combination of house favorites: Calamari, Bruschette of the Day and Mozzarella Marinara	9.49
Shrimp Scampi	Shrimp sautéed with garlic, white wine, herbs and lemon butter, served with garlic toast for dipping	9.49
Cozze In Bianco	Fresh cold water mussels steamed in white wine, basil, lemon butter and Pernod	9.49
Grilled Bruschette	Our bread brushed with extra virgin olive oil, grilled and served with the Chef's fresh toppings of the day	6.99
Mozzarella Marinara	Fresh mozzarella coated with Italian breadcrumbs, lightly fried, served with marinara sauce	7.49

Wood-Fired Pizza

We make our pizza dough by hand daily, prepare all of our pizzas with flavorful, fresh toppings, and bake at 600° in our wood-burning brick oven. Great to share as an appetizer.

Margherita Pizza	Roma tomatoes, basil, extra virgin olive oil and fresh whole milk mozzarella	7.99
Italian Chicken Pizza	Grilled chicken breast in an Italian-style sweet and sour sauce with pine nuts, scallions, romano, fontina and mozzarella cheese	9.99
Ti Piace	Create your own pizza Italian sausage, pepperoni, meatballs, black olives, mushrooms, sweet peppers, onions, tomatoes, sundried tomatoes, eggplant	9.99

Insalate & Zuppe

Soup of the Day	Chef's homemade selection	Cup 2.99 / Bowl 4.49
Minestrone	Homemade, hearty vegetable soup	Cup 2.99 / Bowl 4.49
Salads	House, Italian or Caesar Salad	4.49
Insalata Fiorucci	Mixed field greens tossed with marinated artichoke hearts, roasted red bell peppers and grilled eggplant in vinaigrette, topped with a hazelnut goat cheese medallion	9.99
Insalata Carrabba	Mixed field greens tossed with mozzarella and romano cheese, black olives, tomatoes and red onions in vinaigrette, topped with grilled chicken	9.99
Insalata Carrabba Caesar	Carrabba's caesar salad topped with grilled chicken or shrimp and parmesan cheese	9.99/11.99
Insalata Johnny Rocco	Mixed field greens with grilled shrimp and scallops, roasted red bell peppers, olives and ricotta salata cheese in vinaigrette	11.99

"Non c'e amore piu' sincero di quello del cibo."

"There is no love more sincere than the love of food."