

Note: Those of you who have read my reviews know that I can be hard on restaurants. So I had decided to follow the rule, "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all," which is why you haven't seen many reviews from me. Well today I decided to heck with that! If you actually read something in a review that is positive, you can trust it is the truth.

Johnny Carino's Italian

By
Kelly Justman

What is it about Italian restaurants? They are all over the place. They must have a low overhead. Matthews is overrun with them. Can a new Italian restaurant compete with the ever busy, "No reservations, please" Carrabba's?

Johnny Carino's opened in February or March 2006, I think. What surprised me was that it is a chain. One I had never heard of but I have been told there is one in Michigan.

We went on a Sunday night around 7:30pm. There wasn't a wait but they were busy. Their menu consists of the usual pasta dishes, pizza, chicken and a small meat and fish section. They also offer family platters that serve two to three people and are available for take-out. Most entrees come with unlimited soup or salad. They serve a loaf of warm bread in a white paper bag along with seasoned olive oil for dipping. What might set them apart is they serve Italian soda, with or without cream. The prices range from \$7.49 (cheese pizza) to \$18.49 (Ribeye). That excludes the family platters priced \$18.99 to \$25.99.

Their lunch menu looks pretty good. They actually have grilled Panini sandwiches.

We were starved so we ordered Bruschetta (\$5.29). It was served in a big bowl with the tomatoes in the middle and the toasted bread placed along the edge. There was plenty of it. The first bite had me reaching for salt and pepper. My husband soon followed. Maybe a little more basil would have boosted the flavor, but that wasn't an option for us. In my son's nosey adventures, he found the cheese shredder which came in handy many times throughout the meal, including with the bruschetta.

My husband and I both opted for the unlimited Caesar salad. He ate his without a problem. I exchanged mine for minestrone soup after the first bite. Too much anchovies for my taste. Unfortunately, they were all out of minestrone. Isn't that sacrilegious for an Italian restaurant? I asked about the salad dressings. They did not have Italian dressing. The waitress recommended creamy Gorgonzola so I took the next in line, bread soup. It was different. The soup had a tomato base with some chicken in it. The bread comes into play as a thickening agent. It was lukewarm but I ate almost half of it.

My husband ordered the chicken parmigiana (\$12.49). It was thick and not pounded paper thin. Not much you can really say about chicken parmigiana. They are all basically made the same. He really enjoyed it.

I had the Bowtie Festival (\$11.49). The bowtie pasta was tossed with chicken, bacon, onions, tomatoes and a rich asiago cheese sauce. It didn't blow my mind but it was tasty. I took it home for leftovers.

My husband and son had the Italian sodas. I did something out of character, I ordered a drink. The drink was called Bellini. It was compiled of frozen peach nectar, white wine, champagne, and rum, swirled with their Italian Sangria. I rarely drink alcohol and this should have knocked me on my butt but didn't. Maybe it was all the bread and pasta that I ate or maybe some other reason.

For dessert, we ordered the Italian Chocolate Cake (\$4.99) at my son's persistent request. He had been playing with the fake one sitting on the dessert tray near the entrance. "Rich and flavorful chocolate cake topped with a sweet chocolate icing and toffee, served with vanilla ice cream." The first thing I said was, "Where is the toffee?" The waitress pointed to a little crumb of toffee on the top of the cake. She said, "They don't put much on it, but it is there." It was good chocolate cake. I was really hoping for the toffee to add a little something to it.

We will probably try it again if we don't want to wait at Carrabba's or travel to The Macaroni Grill. If everyone in the area feels the same way, putting Johnny's third or fourth on their list of Italian places, we may soon lose them. If you are going to compete in an area saturated with Italian restaurants, you had better bring something new and different to the table.

Johnny Carino's is located at 1820 Sardis Road in Charlotte, near Wal-Mart.