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Carrabba's: A chain that breaks the mold

Karen Deyle

THE PLACE

Carrabba's wins the prize for having the most reader recommendations and inquiries. Initially, I was skeptical. But I was delighted to find that this is a chain with heart, a sense of family origin and a feeling of warmth and whimsy. Carrabba's is an extension of a family effort founded by Damian Mandola and Johnny Carrabba, a couple of good ol' Sicilian boys from Houston. In addition to the restaurant, they've parlayed their love of food and family into a PBS television show called *Cucina Amore* and cookbooks including *Ciao Y'all*. The walls are decorated with photos of Damian and Johnny's epicurean ancestors.

THE FOOD

Three of us could not reach a consensus on any one appetizer, so we chose the Antipasti Platter (\$11) offering a triple play of favorite appetizers; calamari, bruschetta of the day and mozzarella marinara. The bruschetta was a combination of a rich goat cheese heated and coddled in a ramekin of red sauce. Planks of crunchy garlic toasted bread were served to support the creamy, tangy goodness. The mozzarella was not the precision cut sticks, but appeared to be hand-cut; coated with herbed bread crumbs and fried till crisp. The fried calamari were tender and crisp. While Web site photos show a heap of rings, these came with crispy bundles of the squid legs; looking like a cross between starfish and daisies cartwheeling about the platter. The teen at the table was initially hesitant, but was won over.

I chose the Chicken Bryan (\$16), a grilled breast of chicken breast topped with a creamy round of goat cheese, strips of sweet sun-dried tomatoes and a delicate basil lemon butter sauce. For my side I was delighted to find offerings other than pasta; the veggies of the day were fresh zucchini slices lightly sautéed with some fresh tomatoes and herbs and topped with shreds of Parmesan cheese. Light. Flavorful. Delicious.

One companion ordered the Pasta Weesie (\$14), a generous handful of shrimp, mushrooms and scallions sautéed in garlic, lemon butter and white wine sauce and served over fettuccine Alfredo. It was smooth and seductive; my friend intended to take home half, but was tempted a half-dozen times by "just one more bite."

Her daughter, a teen foodie in the making, chose the Lobster Ravioli (\$16), soft pasta pillows stuffed with a fluffy mix of minced lobster in a creamy white wine sauce with a sprinkling of diced tomatoes. She loved the distinct lobster flavor.

For dessert, we shared an ice cream dish called the John Cole (\$6) — two scoops of Blue Bell vanilla ice cream drizzled with rich caramel sauce and topped with a handful of house roasted cinnamon rum glazed pecans. Deceptively simple and delicious.

THE DRINKS

There is a full bar with three high-topped tables for groups who may want to share some munchies with their drinks. The wine list includes a good representation of Italian wines, along with familiar domestic offerings. Some

of the per glass choices can get a bit pricey.

THE ATMOSPHERE

The dining room is warm, with walls of smoky paprika. The open kitchen is at the rear of the dining room, and the fire from the wood-fired pizza oven lends a soft glow. Pictures of Johnny and Damian's extended Sicilian famiglia are displayed throughout.

THE SERVICE

Our server was familiar and funny yet very attentive. A veteran of other major chains, he kept an expert eye on our table, bringing refills before we could ask and making good suggestions.

QUIRK OF NOTE

Our young companion returned from the restrooms reporting Italian conversations. Sure enough, vocabulary phrases were piping from the speakers, with friendly greetings of "buon giorno" and "grazie" for you to try.

Carrabba's Italian Grill

Address: 3340 West Henrietta Road, Henrietta.

Phone: (585) 292-6120.

Web: www.carrabbas.com.

Hours: Dinner, 4 to 10 p.m. Monday to Thursday; 4 to 10:30 p.m. Friday; 3 to 10:30 p.m. Saturday; 3 to 9 p.m. Sunday.

Seating capacity: 160.

Diet: Vegetarian (Veggie pizza creations, some pastas available without meat at reduced price.)
Low-carb (Some salad options, a half-dozen grill items.)

Access: Wheelchair-accessible entrance and restrooms.

Kids: Five menu items, \$3.99.

Parking: Off-street parking.

Prices: Appetizers, \$6 to \$13; Dinners, \$10 to \$17.

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