

As Seen In **the Parklander**

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Restaurant Review

Raves for Renzo's of Parkland

BY CHARLES MARCANETTI

IN THE ANNALS OF BOCA RATON history, there's a story of a landmark pizzeria operating for many years on the east side of Federal Highway, north of Glades. One day, at the height of the busy hour, a lone gunman entered the eatery and attempted to rob it. A customer, who was carrying a concealed weapon, sought to protect the threatened diners, drew his pistol and a gunfight broke out. The owner of the restaurant was accidentally shot and died of her wounds days later, leaving behind three beautiful daughters. The restaurant closed.

Over the years, it re-opened with new themes and each time it failed.

Fast forward several years and the eponymous Renzo was discussing the story in his restaurant, which has been located just south of the pizzeria on the west side of Federal for many years (Renzo's Restaurant - Renzo Plaza, 5999 North Federal Highway, Boca Raton, 561-994-3495), and is itself a landmark, when an eerie feeling swept over him. You see, Renzo has three daughters, operates one of the finest Italian eateries in all of South Florida, and has as passionate a following as the slain woman had in her establishment. He bought the building (Renzo's Café and Pizzeria, 6900 North Federal Highway, Boca Raton, 561-997-8466).

His next bold move was to re-design it as an Italian pizzeria and re-open it with a café-style menu of pizza and lighter Italian food. It was and remains a great success.

Six weeks ago, Renzo opened yet another restaurant - Renzo's of Parkland. I can say with absolute certainty that this masterpiece will be one of my best-reviewed eateries for next year's annual "Best Reviewed Restaurants" article scheduled for fall, 2012. It is located at the BJ's Plaza on Hillsboro, just west of 441 and is just west of BJ's at 5965 West Hillsboro Blvd., in Parkland (954-753-5353) to the left as you're facing BJ's with your back to Hillsboro.

It is intimate in décor, in lighting, in the mellow sounds of the piano player and the family-like friendliness of the wait staff. This is no ordinary Italian restaurant. It has a Sicilian, as opposed to northern Italian, menu. The north is famous for its creative, even sometimes extravagant, culinary presentations aimed at a more sophisticated palate (there were richer people up north when reputations were being formed in the 1800s. Today, of course, the world is much smaller and recipes are interchangeable).

The Sicilians were more "of the earth" and therefore created fabulously delicious dishes, with vegetables get-



ting as much attention as meat and the joy of eating taking precedence over the etiquette of eating. This means: don't be uptight as you indulge your epicurean fantasies with Renzo's almost beyond description succulence.

Renzo has no formal training as a chef, but could easily be a teacher of chefs. Renzo has no formal training as a raconteur but could hold his own with all the great storytellers. Combine that with his singing chef, who frequently treats the diners to sweet Italian love songs to accompany their sweet Italian wine from Renzo's adequately large wine list, and you are in for one magnificent evening.

I believe my family wended its way from Naples to Greece before coming to Brooklyn, New York. Renzo's family went from Sicily to Long Island, New York, yet he doesn't hold my Napolitano background against me. My father was a chef and he taught me how to love food by savoring its taste and texture, subtlety, aroma, presentation and the people who prepare and serve it. Renzo's is the perfect example of what my dad was sharing with me. Renzo's is as close to eating at home with a master chef in the kitchen as anyone can get, especially if it is true Sicilian cooking you desire. Bravo, Renzo!

There are many much more expensive Italian eateries in the area. Some claim to be Sicilian. None are worth more and none are as authentic. Renzo's isn't the least expensive, but, I alert you now, you will be taking food home. (Hint: if you take home any of the most remarkable wood-fired stove personal pizzas, re-heat them in your oven, not the microwave. It seems that traditional 700-degree ovens favor ovens for re-heating).

We started with roasted peppers with garlic and

anchovies, and roasted eggplant topped with garlic and oil and, by the third appetizer, roasted zucchini with garlic, oil and balsamic vinegar, we soon realized that the evening would be special. Each of us was blown away and eagerly awaited the personal pizzas that turned out to be the lightest, most mouth-watering discs of melted cheese, rare, sweet tomatoes and a crispy crust.

Do not think that Renzo's appetizers are all roasted this or that. I just knew, though, that Sicilian cooking has brought the presentation of vegetables to new heights and I wanted to sample as many different variations as I could. However, to be fair, I also ordered broccoli rabe (pronounced "rob") and insalata caprese (which consists of fresh mozzarella, tomato and basil). Again, each was perfect.

In the salad department (I only review items that are always available), I could not resist two items: calamari salad and scungilli salad. But, I asked our waiter Frank, an extremely talented and polite young man who has worked with Renzo for six years, to combine the two. I loved it and can recommend each (mixed together, they are borderline decadent).

In order to test the depth of Renzo's salad dressing expertise, we also were served the caesar salad. It ought to be bottled and sold, just as his marinara sauce is bottled and sold (only at Costco). Those of you who have tried Renzo's Marinara Sauce need no further explanation. For the rest of you, suffice it to say, you won't go back to Ragu or Barilla. Renzo will convert you to his "near as near can get to making your own" marinara sauce.

On the menu is a silly heading, if you ask me. It says: "Specialties à La Renzo." Please, Renzo, clearly every single item, from anywhere on the menu, is special, though I must admit these were extraordinary. We had the veal Sorrentino that was sautéed with white wine, prosciutto, eggplant and mozzarella cheese. To say that it was the best I've ever had would make my next boast harder, as equally fantastic was the veal chop sautéed with portobello mushrooms.

I always ask about and encourage restaurateurs to seek humanely raised veal and it was no different here. At some point, someday, those of us who love veal will succeed at training restaurants to get the best and be compassionate along the way.

We next had braised lamb shank with pappardelle pasta. It was so tender and moist and juicy that we each wanted to eat all of the order; our routine of sharing went out the door. Renzo insisted that we try the gnocchi vodka and I told him that, to this critic, gnocchi is either great or best used as sinkers for fishermen. He wasn't scared and now I know why. They were the best I've had in Florida. In fact, the last time I had gnocchi as good was in northern New Jersey, in a friend's home, where even if it was horrible, I couldn't complain. It was wonderful up north and wonderful down south at Renzo's.

A word about the various pastas - most are homemade and those that are not are of the finest quality money can buy. Since I love pasta, I sampled virtually all of them and, even though the pappardelle (broad noodles) was my favor-

ite, I had no problem devouring each small plate brought to the table.

The evening finished out with great desserts and espressos/cappuccinos. Our last act of endurance was to crawl our way to our vehicles, stuffed to the point of exploding, but already awaiting our next visit to this astounding eatery.

I no longer have to drive cross-town to indulge my desire to have great food served in a great environment. I also feel confident in saying that, wherever you travel from, you will be delighted, satisfied and happy you made the trip to Renzo's of Parkland. ✨



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