

# Gianna's in Carlstadt

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Restaurant Reviewer .

Shortly after we were seated, Gianna's herself passed through the dining room. She had long, dark hair and wore a leopard-print jumper; we knew her instantly from her pictures inside the front door. She moved through the room as if she owned the place, pausing at each table to chat with familiar patrons. Gianna's stopped at our table as we perused the menus, leaned in, and, in a soft voice, said hello. We hadn't expected such warmth; it was our first visit. Then she said "Bye-bye," and moved on. It was her bedtime. Gianna's is 2, years old.

Her namesake restaurant is just a year old, and Gianna's parents, Tommy and Paula Graziano, deserve to be very proud of both their creations. Guests feel like part of Gianna's extended family, from the warm welcome and attentive service to the family-style portions. Waiting to eat, we watched - and inhaled deeply - as steaming platters of mussels and calamari were delivered to nearby tables. It felt as if everyone were part of the same happy household, and sharing together in the bounty emanating from the kitchen,

## Casual Dining

That, evidently, is just the feeling Tommy Graziano wanted when he renovated and reopened a former bar at the edge of the Meadowlands last year. The idea, he said, came "from my grandmother's," where Sunday dinners were crowded affairs, "This is how I remember doing it all my life." he said.

Each of the big white platters with appetizers and entrees serves at least two --- and often three or more- Families gather at Gianna's for birthdays, Sunday dinner. a night out. The beauty of such a family-style restaurant is that these big groups fill the place with talk and laughter, a conviviality that is contagious. The downside is that a couple dining alone would have to agree on what to share, have very big appetites, or plan to leave with a hefty doggie bag. Weekday nights, several tables were empty perhaps because there aren't enough big groups those days to fill a restaurant. But now that the secret is out, that shouldn't be a problem. Whatever chef Antonio Dabruzzo is doing - procuring the freshest ingredients, using his mother's recipes, or tossing in an extra measure of love - it works.

The details are attended to, also: Our empty breadbasket was immediately, and almost invisibly, replaced; the salad plates were chilled; the crumbs were cleared before dessert, with a large cloth napkin placed over the small mess on the white linen tablecloth.

After the sublime, hard-crust, bread, we tucked into an appetizer of eggplant rollatini (\$7.95). These four tubes of delicate eggplant were stuffed with a ricotta filling so smooth and sweet, I thought I was eating the vegetable version of canoli. Another good choice was the grilled portobello mushroom (\$11.95). Two glistening brown caps, firm and meaty, were drizzled with balsamic vinegar. and lay over a mound of arugula. Caesar salad (\$9) was also perfectly executed, with the freshest romaine and crunchiest croutons. It's hard to know which entrees to recommend; all were excellent. We loved the shell steak contadina (\$38.95) with its heavenly perfume of roast beef. Two enormous steaks, sliced to reveal their tender interior, were surrounded by browned potatoes, a few slices of firm sausage, and some green peppers. It easily served three.

The veal saltimbocca (\$38.95) showed care with a classic preparation: The layer of prosciutto on the veal was kept moist by the thinnest slice of eggplant. Six cutlets, arrayed over soft, emerald-green spinach, were garnished with the halves of two hard-boiled eggs, just like Grandma made it. Servings of pasta are also generous, a perfect side dish. A platter with two items - lasagna, manicotti, stuffed shells, or ravioli - is \$21.95. The lasagna showcased a subtly seasoned ground meat between slippery, homemade pasta sheets. Six fat pillows of ricotta, or four long tubes of manicotti with a creamy filling, were also wonderful. Shrimp scampi (\$32.95), a simple preparation over linguine. featured 14 big shrimp.

It would be a sin to leave Gianna's with our tasting the desserts, all homemade by Paula Graziano (\$6.50 to \$7.50). She follows her fancy: One day we tried a rich strawberry zabaglione, the sauce a reduction of red wine with sugar and egg yolk. Another day she brought out a laughably tall, white-frosted strawberry shortcake, and another time the classic New York or Italian cheesecake. Her tiramisu is light and full of whipped cream, with "Gianna's" inscribed upon it in swirls of chocolate syrup.