



Culinary Corner

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REVIEW



Bobby Cochran/CW photos

Braised lamb shank on a creamy, soft polenta is a popular dinner special at Fiamma.

FIAMMA RESTAURANT

★★★★★ out of 5

Location: 2418 Park Road

Phone: 704-333-3062; Fax: 704-333-4363

Price range: Lunch, \$4-\$8, including soft drinks; dinner, \$9.50-\$19.

Hours: Lunch served Monday through Saturday, 11:30 a.m.-3 p.m.; dinner served Monday through Sunday, 5-11 p.m.

Details: Reservations accepted and recommended; takeout, in-season patio dining; nonsmoking dining room and bar; family friendly; \$15 corkage fee; catering services available.

Hot Stuff

Dilworth's Fiamma Italian restaurant catches on like wildfire

by Heidi Billotto
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Searching for one of the hottest new restaurants in town? Follow the crowds and look no further than Fiamma. The restaurant is snuggled in the Park Square Shopping Center on Park Road in the space once home to the Rheinland Haus. Chefs and owners Kerwin Astidillo and Fernando Campoverde opened the doors May 28 after extensive remodeling. Longtime Charlotte restaurant patrons will hardly recognize the place. "We took out walls, painted, and opened up the dining room and the kitchen," explained Astidillo. Before, the space was dark, small and cramped; but now, in addition to giving themselves more elbow room in the food prep areas, Astidillo and Campoverde's renovations have made the dining room airier and much more appealing. In one corner of the kitchen is a wood-burning pizza oven situated with the flame side open to the dining room. The oven's 700-degree flame, or *fiamma* in Italian, is where the restaurant gets its name.

Surefire winner

The menu at Fiamma is Italian although Astidillo and Campoverde originally hail from Ecuador. My first question was to ask if the two had considered opening an Ecuadorian restaurant.

"We really did our research and came to Charlotte

because it's a good town for restaurants and a good place to raise our families. Maybe an Ecuadorian restaurant some day, but right now, Italian cuisine is what works here," said Astidillo.

From the American Italian-style chains to the more upscale, independently owned establishments, each one seems to have found its own niche on the Queen City restaurant scene.

"The quality comes from using fresh ingredients. But our goal is to offer a complete dining experience – food, service, wine – it all goes together," said Campoverde. "This is the American dream, to work hard, do a good job and have a successful business."

Astidillo and Campoverde come to Charlotte from New York with a great deal of restaurant experience, a laundry list of credentials and culinary know-how.

Blazing salads

The dinner menu at Fiamma is divided into sections featuring *antipasti* or appetizers, meats, seafoods, pizzas and desserts, but quite honestly it's taken me several trips to get through the pasta and salads. While one would normally consider these two courses precursors to the main event, at Fiamma, they are each a cause for celebration.

Unique salad choices include *insalate del tropici* with frisée greens, hearts of palm and cherry tomatoes topped with large slices of thinly

shaved Parmesan; *delizia del contradine*, a mixed green salad with spicy walnuts, pears and Tuscan pecorino cheese; and *insalata di carciofi*, where the plate of frisée is topped with thin slices of sautéed baby artichoke, studded with whole pistachios and, like the hearts of palm salad, finished with thinly shaved Parmesan.

The listing of appetizers includes a soup of the day, a tasty salmon tartar, and a don't-you-dare-miss-it calamari dish called *calamari al salto*. For those compelled to ask for calamari breaded and fried, this dish is a real step out of the box. Treat yourself to tender ribbons of calamari, sautéed like fat pieces of pasta with chunks of avocado and finished in white wine and pepperoncini. The warm rich flavor will bring your taste buds to life.

Team the salad or starter with one of Fiamma's fabulous pasta dishes for a winning combination. Many of the pastas are homemade and noodles practically melt in your mouth. *Tagliolini allo zafferano* features a pile of fresh homemade tagliolini seasoned with saffron and served with large chunks of crabmeat and sautéed tomatoes; while the *linguine neri con polipo* is a plate of black linguini, made with squid ink to achieve the color, and tossed with tender octopus in a homemade spicy tomato sauce. Both dishes are top



Calamari al salto is one of the melt-in-your-mouth offerings on Fiamma's dinner menu.

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notch. As far as pastas featuring macaroni noodles go, for me, it's a toss up between the *penne bizanzio*, served with fresh tomato, basil and mozzarella, the *rigatoni alle tre p* with prosciutto, peas and heavy cream and the *fusilli segesta* served with a San Marzano tomato sauce, eggplant and a grated ricotta salata. While these dishes center around purchased pasta rather than homemade, the quality is extremely high. That said, my favorite pasta at Fiamma is the *ravioli de giorno*. Each day handmade thin, tender pillows of light dough are stuffed with a different filling. I've had ravioli at Fiamma stuffed once with roasted eggplant and once with a mix of sautéed mushrooms; both could easily be described as heavenly.

An inferno of flavors

It's the combination and interaction of flavors at Fiamma that makes the place a standout. Each sauce is different with characteristics and seasonings suited to each individual dish. When it comes to meats and seafoods Fiamma doesn't disappoint. Lamb loin chops on the dinner menu and braised lamb shank, often served as a special, are both presented with creamy, soft polenta. Superb. Likewise for the *pollo al mattone*, roasted chicken finished with lemon and herbs, served with potatoes and

caramelized onions. Tender red snapper is sautéed with white wine, tomato broth, olives and capers for a taste of the Mediterranean.

Pizzas are large enough for two to share as a starter or for one person to enjoy alongside a soup, salad or appetizer. The crust is thin, crisp and crunchy. Toppings take in a variety of flavor from the *robiola* pizza with imported cow's milk cheese and white truffle oil to the *fungi* pizza topped with wild mushrooms, tomato and mozzarella. The four-cheese pizza topped with Gorgonzola, mozzarella, fontina and Parmesan is full-flavored, while the classic margherita pie with fresh tomato basil and mozzarella is delightfully understated.

It always seems trite to say save room for dessert, but at Fiamma it is a must. While the light and airy ricotta cheesecake, the rich vanilla *panna cotta* drizzled with aged balsamic and the raspberry topped caramelized custard crème brûlée are all excellent choices, it's the warm chocolate tart that stole my heart. If you dine at Fiamma on a weeknight when the dining room isn't quite as busy, you might also be treated to *gelato* from time to time or a sip of Campoverde's homemade *limoncello*, a syrupy lemon liquor that makes a perfect end to the evening. □

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What's cookin'

edited by **Heidi Billotto**
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Charles Semail, owner of Chef Charles Catering, presents a traditional Thanksgiving feast delivered to your home. The menu includes a precarved, oven-roasted, smoked or deep-fried turkey and an extensive number of sides including bread, sage and celery stuffing and a Vermont cheddar-corn pudding. The full menu is available at www.chef-charlescatering.com. Call 704-423-8300 for more information. Orders may be placed until 3 p.m. Nov. 14.



The 13th Annual Beaujolais Wine Tasting Festival, co-sponsored by Charlotte Sister Cities and the Alliance Française de Charlotte, will take place Thursday, Nov. 17, from 5 to 8:30 p.m. at the Levine Museum of the New South, 200 E. Seventh St. Free parking is available in the Seventh Street Station parking deck. Admission is \$30 with a \$5 discount for CSC and AF members. By decree of the French government, the third Thursday in November is the first day that Beaujolais wines of any given year are released for tasting. The Charlotte festival is one of only 16 held in the United States and sanctioned by the Beaujolais region of France. In addition to the tasting, the event will include food, entertainment, a raffle and a silent auction. For more information, call Charlotte Sister Cities at 704-333-3399 or Alliance Française de Charlotte at 704-543-7076.



The 2006 Street Turkeys kickoff begins Friday, Nov. 3, from 3 to 7 p.m., at Phillips Place Shopping Center, 6711 Phillips Place. This annual turkey drive benefits Second

Harvest Food Bank of Metrolina, Community Food Rescue, and Loaves and Fishes by collecting turkeys and feeding those who are less fortunate. The kickoff will include a live broadcast from WFNZ's Mark Packer, "The Packman," who will give any individual, group or business making a financial donation during his broadcast the opportunity to make their donation live on the air. Mark Packer created the Street Turkeys Drive in 2003. Since its inception, it has generated more than \$90,000 and 8,000 turkeys. Later this month, WFNZ will partner with the Charlotte Bobcats and WJZY CW 46 for another turkey drive on Wednesday, Nov. 22, from 7 a.m. until 7 p.m., at the WFNZ / ADT Dog House, located across the street from Bank of America Stadium at Mint and Morehead streets, and at the Bobcats Arena from 5:30 p.m. until 7 p.m. For more information on Second Harvest Food Bank of Metrolina, contact Donna Ragan at 704-376-1785.



Chef Mark Shook and his staff at The Duke Mansion will be cooking Thanksgiving dinners to go. Order a full dinner with sides for up to 12 guests, or choose individual items a la carte. The complete dinner features butternut squash soup or mixed green salad, herb-roasted turkey with Granny Smith apple butter or honey-glazed ham with pineapple relish, mashed Red Bliss potatoes, giblet gravy, fresh cranberry compote, candied sweet potatoes, and a dozen of The Duke Mansion's signature biscuits. Shook also is offering a choice of green bean casserole, creamed corn, roasted vegetables, corn-bread dressing, herb stuffing, and pumpkin, sweet potato, apple or bourbon-pecan pie. The complete dinner is \$207 plus tax. Items also are priced individually. Call 704-714-4400 for details and to place orders by Sunday, Nov. 19.