



# Culinary Corner

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## REVIEW



Bobby Cochran/CW photos

Offering something for everyone, Vinnie's Sardine Grill & Raw Bar's four Charlotte locations serve up saucy wings, unforgettable grouper sandwiches and hearty burgers.

## Grouper gone wild

Local raw bars offer fun, flavorful eats

by Heidi Billotto  
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With four locations in Charlotte, Vinnie's Sardine Grill & Raw Bar is a great place for consistently good food and exceptional service. Open since 1993 and locally owned by partners Britton McCorkle and Rad Bennett, the original Vinnie's is on South Boulevard. The Matthews location opened 10 years ago and the Lake Norman and Mountain Island Lake locations followed about five years ago.

### Great grouper, wonderful wings

A strong management team makes the fare and service at all locations consistent, evidenced by the fact that customers continue to return, no matter the locale. Food is simple but good, and favorites include Alaska king or snow crab legs, raw oysters, shrimp selections, wings and the ever-popular grouper sandwiches. "Aside from the nightly beer specials, the

blackened grouper sandwich is probably the most popular item on the menu," said Richard Morris, manager of the Vinnie's in Matthews.

Paired with a side of fresh, hot steak fries, the grouper sandwich is certainly this reviewer's top choice for lunch and an occasional dinner, too. Proclaimed on the menu as "the most popular fish sandwich of the year," the grouper sandwich consists of a large, tender grouper fillet, almost twice as big as the bun on which it arrives, served blackened, grilled or fried.

While the blackened choice packs more flavor, the fried fillet has a nice crispy crunch and lacks the greasy mess. Shredded iceberg lettuce and a slice of tomato are the standard add-ons, while a pickle on the side rounds out the plate. Customers may request the addition of grilled onions, peppers, mushrooms or bacon. The grouper comes, as do all of Vinnie's sandwiches, with a choice of sides. Although the coleslaw and the onion rings are both good, don't miss the fries.

VINNIE'S SARDINE GRILL & RAW BAR  
★★★ 1/2 out of 5

**Locations:** In Charlotte at 1714 South Blvd., 704-332-0006; in Matthews at 142 E. John St., 704-849-0202; at Lake Norman at 643 Williamson Road, 704-799-2090; in Mountain Island Lake at 10916 Black Dog Lane, 704-393-2203  
**Price range:** \$6.95-\$13.95; crab legs and oysters are market priced.

**Hours:** Sunday, noon-11 p.m.; Monday-Saturday, 11-2 a.m. (The Matthews location closes at midnight on Monday and Tuesday and at 1 a.m. Wednesday-Saturday.)

**Details:** Nightly dinner or drink specials; takeout; catering; oyster roasts and shrimp or crab boils done on- and off-site; patio dining; nonsmoking section; full-service bar; water and boat access at the Lake Norman location.

For details: visit [www.vinniesrawbar.com](http://www.vinniesrawbar.com).

For days when one cannot live by fries and grouper sandwiches alone, try the Buffalo wings. Served as an appetizer, the basket of a dozen pieces is plenty

## Culinary Corner

for a meal. While the wings are not incredibly spicy, they are saucy and scrumptious. Keep the roll of paper towels provided on the table nearby, because this is finger food for sure. Served with the traditional condiments of blue-cheese dressing and celery sticks, the wings are lightly fried and then sauced. Popular Vinnie's wing varieties include the Barbalo wings, fried and then coated with a zesty barbecue sauce, and the teriyaki wings, prepared in a similar manner. Vinnie's also offers wings seasoned with a spiced, dry rub, a variety that seems to be gaining popularity.

Other worthwhile menu items include the fried calamari appetizer, fresh shucked oysters and steamed shrimp, all served with wonderful homemade cocktail sauce, and the salt-and-pepper catfish basket. The basket, like other fried fish combinations at Vinnie's, includes sides of slaw, corn on the cob and fries. Portions are generous, so come hungry.

The steaks at Vinnie's don't do much for me, but the burgers are delicious. The veggie burger is studded with black beans. The yellowfin tuna sandwich, offered grilled or blackened, is a nice alternative, as is the fried oyster po' boy, served stuffed with shredded lettuce and tomatoes. Po' boys also come with shrimp, catfish or chicken, but none of

these selections are as delectable as the grouper.

The service at Vinnie's is spot-on, fast and efficient. Turnaround time is quick for those with a limited lunch hour and the wait for a drink refill is practically nonexistent. Aside from dining at any of the four locations across the city, Vinnie's brings tasty oyster roasts and crab or shrimp boils directly to customers. They provide it all – cooking onsite and making entertaining easy.

### Smoke in your eyes

In addition to all the good food and fast service at Vinnie's, the bar is a big part of the place's attraction. The smoking section accounts for more than half of the restaurant, including a portion of the dining area, the bar and all of the patio area. Pipes and cigars are allowed on the patio as well, which makes dining out-of-doors at Vinnie's a nonviable option for me.

For many nonsmokers, the hazy atmosphere at Vinnie's takes away from the taste of the food. Even during the day, when the bar isn't quite as crowded, the smell of smoke lingers. If the smoke is really bothersome, don't give up on Vinnie's all together – takeout is a great option. Orders may be called in ahead or placed onsite. □

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## What's cookin'

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Enter the third annual Edy's Slow Churned Neighborhood Salute to win one of 1,500 free ice cream block parties. The contest's ice cream prize package includes doorstep delivery of 12 cartons of Edy's slow-churned light ice cream in a variety of flavors and a "Party in a Box" packed with bowls, spoons, scoops, party invitations and name tags for up to 100 neighborhood guests.

To enter, visit [www.icecream.com](http://www.icecream.com) by Friday, May 25, to submit an explanation of 350 words or less why your neighborhood deserves an Edy's Slow Churned Neighborhood Salute. Edy's will notify each of the 1,500 winning neighborhoods in June.



In acknowledgment of Hunger Awareness Day on June 5, UNITY, a group of Charlotte-area agencies and businesses concerned about hunger, is partnering with the United Way of Central Carolinas to conduct a poverty simulation Monday, June 4, from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. at Covenant Presbyterian Church. The \$20 cost includes lunch. Participants in the pover-

ty simulation will assume the roles of low-income individuals struggling to pay rent, retain utilities' services and feed hungry children.

Hunger and poverty are facts of life for more than 100,000 people living in Mecklenburg County, including more than 8,000 children and 34,000 seniors. A Charlotte parent with two children would need an annual income of \$30,800 to cover basic needs, but an area full-time job at minimum wage only pays \$12,792 per year. One-third of the children in Mecklenburg County are on some form of public assistance and nearly 2,000 homeless children are enrolled in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

To participate, contact Stephanie Fisher at Crisis Assistance Ministry at 704-371-3000, ext. 122, or at [sfisher@crisisassistance.org](mailto:sfisher@crisisassistance.org).



Congratulations to Chase Holfelder of Charlotte, winner of the "My Harris Teeter" jingle contest. With no formal voice training, the 22-year-old UNC Wilmington graduate has been singing since his parents bought a karaoke machine when he was 7. Chase was awarded \$10,000 and his jingle rendition will be played during the season finale of "American Idol." □