



Chef Marcell Veiga and co-owners Debbie and Nicole Gencarelli

Bon Appétit

By Grace Russell, photos by Dan Epstein

Gencarelli's Cucina

TRADITIONAL ITALIAN WITH AN UPSCALE TWIST

Sometimes the biggest challenge facing a restaurant writer is imparting the essence of a true gem within the limits of a single column. So it is with a happy discovery in Montclair called Gencarelli's Cucina, owned by the mother/daughter team of Debbie and Nicole Gencarelli, ably assisted by chef Marcell Veiga.

Gencarelli's soothing rustic interior, designed by Nicole Gencarelli, greets you with a wave of relaxation. And it will only be a moment before Debbie Gencarelli herself greets you with her contagious enthusiasm. "This business is about food and people," she says, adding that customers are comfortable at her restaurant—as if they are dining in Debbie's own home. "When you feel welcome, you're going to enjoy yourself," she adds.

Properly greeted, we begin with the \$12.95 House Signature Salad—a number one seller featuring mixed greens with goat cheese, cranberries, and caramelized pecans in raspberry vinaigrette. From light to hearty, we're on to *Mozzarella in Carrozza*—two giant helpings of Italian bread, filled with sweet, fresh mozzarella, finished with the house marinara sauce—practically a meal in itself for \$12.

Shrimp Dijon, \$13.95, plump and perfect shrimp in a velvety cream sauce with a whisper of Dijon mustard, resting on a bed of sautéed spinach, was another winner in the appetizer department.

If, as Debbie Gencarelli says, "The glue to many dishes in good Italian cooking is the gravy," then Mrs. G.'s Sunday Gravy, \$20.95—a workman's portion of rigatoni, golf-ball-sized meatballs and homemade fennel-laced sausage—is a must-try. Held together beautifully by her famous red gravy, the dish features seedless, skinless, organic tomatoes for a sweet and acid-free sauce.

Although the menu is southern Italian, the standouts include what Chef Veiga ("I cook with my heart") calls his "twist" on traditional Italian.

Typical is *Cavatelli Siciliana*, \$19.95—homemade cavatelli sautéed with mushrooms, roasted eggplant, fresh tomatoes, garlic, and mozzarella, topped with bread crumbs and baked in a light marinara sauce. Or the *Snapper Pescatore* special, \$27.95, a seafood extravaganza of two meaty red snapper fillets surrounding a shellfish assortment, all topped with plum tomatoes and fresh basil in a white wine and garlic sauce. Bravo!

For the \$25.95 Steak Arabiatta special, Veiga grills the meat and tops it with vinegar peppers, sausage, and mushrooms in a demi-glaze reduction and a complement of brown rice and Corn O'Brian—a medley of roasted corn and diced red peppers. Another delectable choice on the Gencarelli's menu is the \$22.95 tenderloin of pork, simmered in a Barolo mushroom sauce. The delicious pork, however, couldn't help but take a back seat to the creamy, rich risotto parmigiano that accompanied it—one of the finest risottos we've tasted.

"I like to work with different side dishes, especially vegetables, to complement my entrees," says Veiga, who was chosen by the Food Network to appear on *Iron Chef America* on July 26. "No generic vegetables here," he adds, as he offers a helping of roasted sweet butternut squash, lightly mashed and touched with sage, making us instant believers.

Desserts at Gencarelli's are homemade and outstanding. Two favorites are a pineapple mango tart special, with caramelized peaches and homemade Bavarian cream—and a sinful chocolate mousse cake, dark and smooth.

Whether you're on your way home from work or finishing dinner, pick up a quart of Mrs. G.'s Gravy or Gencarelli's homemade Vodka sauce. And with spring in full bloom, Gencarelli's beautifully decorated patio is the perfect al fresco setting for sampling some of the best Italian food you'll encounter. ▲

For Chef Veiga's special family-favorite recipe, visit www.SuburbanEssex.com

