

New York-style Italian at The Red Pepper

BY HOLLY HERRICK
Of The Post and Courier Staff

In the Big Apple, classic Italian eateries serving gravy and pasta and killer salads with tongue-tingling Italian vinaigrettes can be found at virtually every corner.

These low-fuss places, where the waiters handle you with reserved deference and the food tastes like someone snapped their fingers to deliver it from someone's kitchen in rural Italy, are true blessings. It's hard to find this kind of Italian soul food in greater Charleston, particularly downtown. A visit to the excellent Red Pepper, which is about the closest I've encountered in these parts to what I've just described, left me and my guests wishing it was closer to downtown. I'm sure Italian food fans in Summerville are glad to have this 18-year-old restaurant (formerly Enzo's) around. I would not hesitate to visit it again and again, even if it were 20 miles farther away from my downtown digs.

The authenticity stems from executive chef/owner Fred White. A native of Rochester, N.Y., and the grandson of an Italian native, he grew up in kitchens and has worked in them professionally most of his life. His resumé includes a 20-year stint at the "No. 2 rated" Italian restaurant in Denver, work in Chicago, and ownership of Sergeant Pepper Restaurant in Atlanta. He and his wife, Donna, opened The Red Pepper because they felt that Charleston needed a "functional Italian restaurant." He thought about a downtown location, but high rents and a notion that Summerville needed something "desperately" led him to this space on the town's neon-rich Main Street.

White's emphasis is on quality, Italian-style. He will not allow any cook to prepare food until they have trained under him for three months. Sauces are personally prepared by White three times a week,

pizza dough and bread are made by hand, all wines are Italian, and he buys Omaha Black Angus beef (only) from a trusted source.

All of this dedication shines in the food, as well as the cheery atmosphere and staff. The restaurant is clean and bright, with warming brick walls with white trim. A small bar fills one corner of the room that was attractively decked with twinkling white holiday lights and all the trimmings.

The menu drips with beloved Italian offerings from manicotti (\$9.95) to veal marsala (\$17.95), plus a host of nightly specials. There's lots for vegetarians to select from, since White prepares meatless

received just that in the toothsome Chianti Classico, Ricasoli "1141" (\$28.95). The special-of-the-day-soup (\$3.50) was a heart-warming white bean and cabbage. It resonated with mild roasted garlic and a "just-right" acidic vinegar blush. The shrimp scampi cocktail (\$8.95) was simultaneously unusual and delicious. Four (I would have liked to have seen six, for the price) large pieces of grilled shrimp were served over a well buttered oregano and garlic seasoned bed of tender orzo. The combination of texture and flavor was most savory.

Despite fervent recommendations for the fettuccine Alfredo (\$12.95) and the mista mare

Diavola (\$18.95), I succumbed to a personal favorite, lasagna (\$11.95). The waitress pointed out that it was meatless, but that it had three cheeses and was a house favorite. It has reason to be. The hearty rectangular wedge was bursting with the mellow ease of mozzarella, provolone and ricotta and was punctuated by one of the best, meatiest meatless marinara sauces possible on Earth. The aged, rich flavor of top-grade New York strip rang true in one of the beef specials we sampled (\$19.95). The simplicity of a bevy of button mushrooms sautéed in garlic and butter spooned over the top was also perfectly gratifying. As an added bonus, the beef was cooked to order at medium rare. A snappy blend of thinly sliced, then

sautéed zucchini, onions, oregano, garlic and olive oil brought color and crunch to this hungry man's feast.

House salads, an uncomplicated mix of Romaine, tomatoes, cucumbers, red onions and peppers, were served cold and crispy and were lightly tossed in an almost perfect vinaigrette. The vinegar was balsamic, which is good enough, but it's become so ubiquitous that an aged red vinegar would have been an increasingly rare treat.

Desserts are made in-house by chef White and his wife. We had the Italian rum cake (\$4.95). Whoever made this knows what they're doing. The homemade white cake was lovingly soaked with rum and

The Red Pepper

(Night Out)

709 N. Main St., Summerville
873-8600

FOOD ★★ ★★
SERVICE ★★ ★★ 1/2
AMBIENCE ★★ ★★ 1/2
PRICE \$\$\$

AMBIENCE: Casual, familial elegance.
SERVICE: Friendly and professional young staff.

HOURS: 11:30 a.m.-9:30 p.m.,
Mon.-Sat.

DECIBEL LEVEL: Low.

PRICE RANGE: Appetizers, \$2.50-\$8.95; Entrees, \$8.95-\$18.95.

OUR FAVORITES: Garlic bread, scampi cocktail, white bean soup, New York strip, lasagna, white rum cake.

VEGETARIAN ALTERNATIVES: Extensive. Over two-thirds of the pasta entrees are vegetarian. Salads and some soups are also.

WINE LIST: Exclusively Italian. 16 varieties by the bottle, \$19.95-\$49.95. Several house varieties available by the glass, \$4.75. Italian beer available. Full bar service.

CC: Visa/MC/AmEx/Discover.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS: Yes.

SMOKING: Bar/patio.

RESERVATIONS: Required for parties of five or more.

RESTAURANT FACTS

Rating criteria include quality and presentation of food, service and ambience, while taking into consideration the type of restaurant: elegant, night out or neighborhood favorite.

WHAT THE STARS MEAN:

★ Fair, ★★ Average, ★★★ Good, ★★★★★ Excellent, ★★★★★ Extraordinary.

PRICE:
\$ Least Expensive \$\$\$\$\$ Most Expensive

layered with a white frosting. A thin tier of chocolate cake near the bottom of the slice provided rich color and counter to the rum. The cake was as fresh and moist as it could be.

The Red Pepper recently built a large wooden deck at the front of the restaurant for al fresco dining. Heat lamps are on order for more comfortable dining outside during winter months. Whatever the season, it is a splendid addition to an already splendid restaurant, and will allow more seating for fans of authentic New York-style Italian food.

The Red Pepper hits the spot.



sauce, a specialty based on historic tradition from the "old country," where historically, meat was not always prevalent.

A bubbly college student possessing a level of finesse that belied her years and a trainee guided us merrily throughout the meal. Timing and accuracy were both on the mark and there was plenty of sincerity to go around.

Steaming, soft garlic bread (\$2.50) was alluring, with intense aroma and buttery flavor. It was topped with cheese and fresh herbs. It could have used a little more browning in the oven for crunchy texture, but the softness went well with what followed. We requested a full-bodied Chianti, and