

Dine & Wine

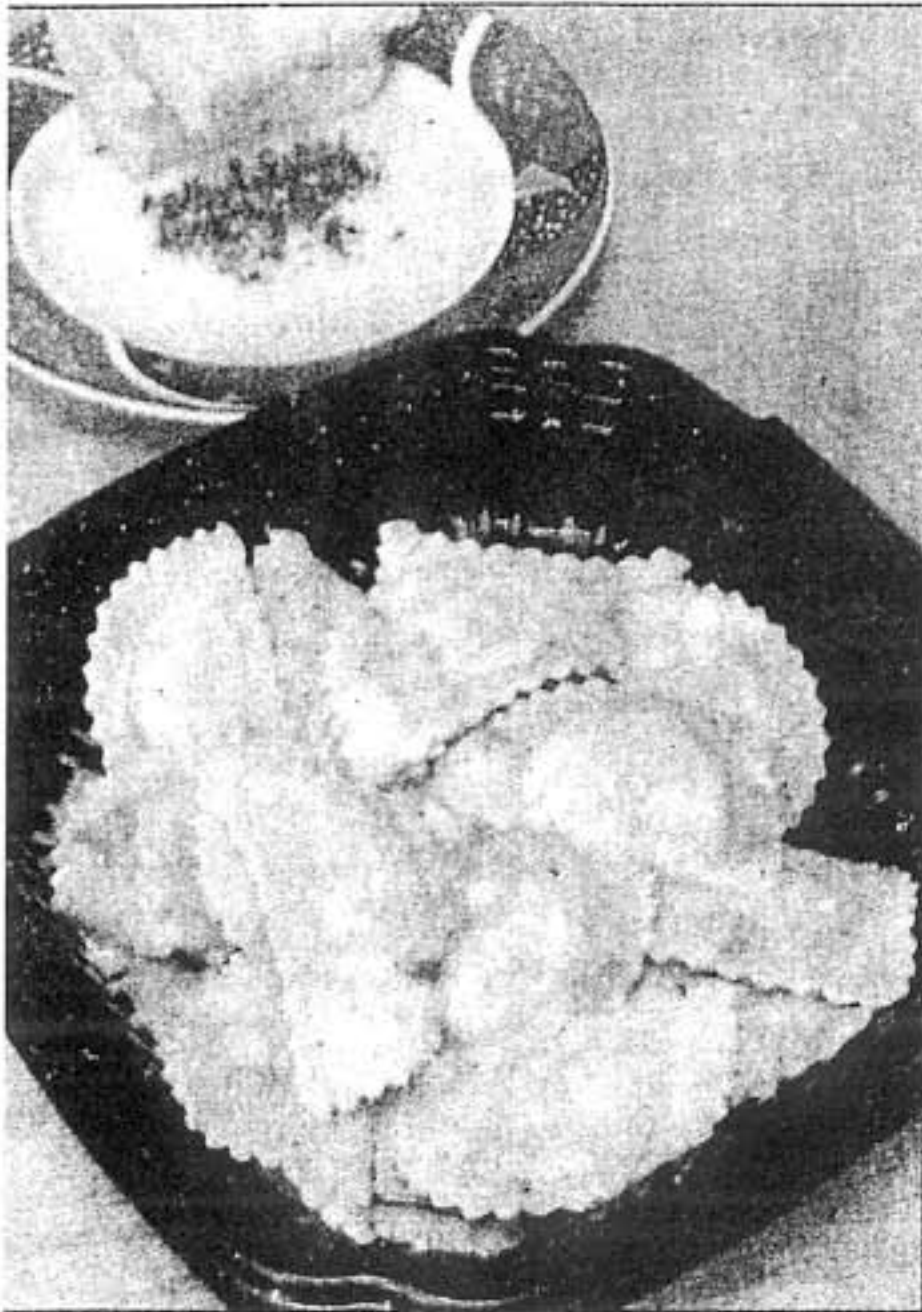
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RESTAURANTS | IN FRIDAY'S E&T

HELEN SCHWAB: Looking for whole snapper with chiles or a killer curry? Try Thai Marlai in Cornelius.

Get It to Go | ROBIN HALL DOMEIER

Carrabba's sets high bar for curbside service



ROBIN HALL DOMEIER - Special to The Observer

Mezzaluna Ravioli from Carrabba's Italian Grill had an airy chicken filling and a light tomato sauce.

Carrabba's Italian Grill

1520 South Blvd., in the South End area; 704-377-2458. Additional locations: 10400 E. Independence Blvd., Matthews; 7900 Lyles Lane, Concord; 16408 Northcross Drive, Huntersville; and 1954 13th Ave. Drive SE, Hickory.

11:30 a.m.-10 p.m. Monday-Thursday; 11:30 a.m.-11:00 p.m. Friday-Saturday; 11:30 a.m.-10 p.m. Sunday. Prices: \$4.99 (minestrone) to \$13.49 (sirloin Marsala) at lunch; up to \$20.99 (filet Fiorentina) at dinner.

My second take-out review, and already Carrabba's has set a high bar. Carrabba's curbside take-out was favolosamente. That's Italian for "wonderful, y'all." And the chicken Marsala, calamari and mezzaluna ravioli kept pace with the service.

The call

I don't know if the idea of curbside take-out says Americans are ingenious or that we're a nation of slugs too lazy to even get out of the car. Throw some salt on me because I was geeked to see how the concept worked. After I placed my order, someone asked what type of car I was

driving and told me to park in the spaces for curbside pickup.

The first time I went, a server ran (no kidding) to the car, handed me the check and then ran back in to ring up the order. He brought the receipt and the food in a large brown paper sack and placed it on the front seat. The entire process took less than five minutes.

On both of my two visits, I was told it would be a 15-minute wait. On my second call, the order-taker politely asked if 15 minutes would give me enough time to get there. Ahh, pamper me more.

The food

Carrabba's must spend a fortune on packaging because everything (even grated Parmesan) was packaged separately in sleek, black containers. It wasn't until the second visit that I figured out the herbs in a tiny round container were to pour in the olive oil (packaged separately) that went with the bread.

■ Half-moon shaped Mezzaluna Ravioli were filled with an airy mixture of chicken, ricotta and spinach. A pink-tinged tomato cream sauce coated but didn't weigh down the pasta.

■ Plenty of cabbage, carrots, celery, kidney and green beans swam in the minestrone soup's golden chicken broth.

■ Dry (meaning non-sweet) Marsala was used in Chicken Marsala. Once reduced, or cooked down, the wine made a flavorful sauce to spoon over scads of mushrooms and a hand-somely grilled chicken breast.

■ Insalata Fiorucci required assembly. I placed the grilled eggplant and hazelnut goat cheese medallion on top of the field greens, artichoke hearts and roasted red peppers. But if the salad arrived with the medallion on top, it would have gotten soggy and cold. So, good job, kitchen.

■ A couple of items didn't fare as well. Calamari was on the rubbery side. The crust of the Italian chicken pizza was dry, and the pizza wasn't very warm when I checked in the car, so imagine what it was like after I got home. A trip through the oven could solve the temperature issue but would dry the crust out even more.

Of note: Carrabba's is part of OSI Restaurant Partners Inc., which is the parent company of Outback Steakhouse. Outback

also offers curbside takeout.

Credit cards: All major.

Web: www.carrabbas.com.

Vegetarian entrees: Tagliarini picchi pacchiu (pasta in crushed tomatoes, garlic, olive oil and basil); quattro formaggi ravioli (four-cheese ravioli).

Robin Domeier is owner of Nibbles Personal Chef.

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