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RECIPES ↻ REVIEWS

BY DAWN QUYLE LANDAU

Nona Rosa's

A FAMILY AFFAIR

WHEN WE dine out, we look for great food, a fun atmosphere and enough variety to please everyone. In the case of Nona Rosa's, the latest restaurant at 113 E. Magnolia, we've hit on a very good thing.

At Nona Rosa's, service and great food is a family affair. Bellingham native Catrina Bremer is the owner and driving force behind the operation, but the whole family is involved. The eatery is named for Catrina's mother, Rosa—Nona means "grandmother" in Sicilian—who is there most days, along with Catrina's three children, Jonathan, Josh, and Gina, who all work hard to help make mom's dream a success.

All of the recipes started with Rosa, and bringing them to the public is a dream Catrina's had her entire life. "All of my childhood memories revolve around a table: food, games, laughter... every meal was like a party, and that's what I wanted to bring to my own restaurant," she says.

Catrina and family strive to recreate an authentic trattoria-style dining experience, with casual atmosphere, family-style food and reasonable pricing. The entire menu is anchored in traditional foods from Sicily, which differs from Northern Italian food particularly in the lack of creams, a bend toward spicy and simplicity.

This menu's limited for vegetarians, with delicious Melanzane Parmigiano (Eggplant Parmesan, \$13) and Spaghetti (\$4/\$8) the only options for those who don't eat seafood either. Several tasty salads and appetizers are meatless, including my favorite, calamari salad (\$6). The Caponatina (\$6) is a close second, with eggplant, caper and olive tapenade. Salads are served individually (\$3.5-\$6) or in larger bowls for families or groups (\$10-\$14).

The Antipasto Plate (\$13) is enormous and the Salsa Rosa (\$7) with a spicy pomodoro sauce and goat cheese, served with crostini, is delicious, though a tad spicy for this wimpy diner. (We've found the crostini a bit over-toasted several times, but noticed it had improved recently.) The Arancini (\$4), a risotto (rice) ball stuffed with beef ragu and mozzarella cheese, was a group favorite. Wine by the glass or liter (\$22-\$24) and fruity sangria are available.

With friends, the ability to share food is critical. Consequently, I've now sampled every entree, and, excellence reigns. One friend noted that because he grew up in an Italian home he's very picky when it comes to pasta. However, he found the Gamberetti al Salsa



Rosa (prawns in spicy pomodoro sauce, finished with goat cheese) and the Carbonara (\$6/\$12), "delicious!" The prawns were enormous and cooked to perfection, the sauce incredible.

Rosa's Carbonara is a lighter take on the heavy-cream favorite. Salsiccia (\$13) packs a punch with sausage, potatoes, onions and peppers, and we brought home as much as we ate. Servings are generous and most are offered in full and half portions. The Pollo al Rosto (roasted chicken, \$15) was not as unique as other items we've tried, but it's a good standby for those who want something simple.

If you're looking for a truly unusual dinner, Nona Rosa's features an entire roasted Porchetta (\$24, pork) the last weekend of every month. I'm not a big fan of stuffing, but this pork is filled with the most delicious blend of rice, bread, pork, vegetables, eggs, beef...the list is endless. The meat was in-

credibly tender and the seasoning perfection. This alone is worth a trip in.

After all this, it's hard to imagine wanting dessert; however, don't skip it. Nona's Famous Cannoli (\$6) is out of this world! The ricotta is made in house and the fried pastry is *perfecto*. Outside of Italy or "little Italy" in New York City, I haven't tasted better. The profteroli (\$6 for 3), puff pastries filled with "light" custard cream are hard to beat as well.

Nona's interior is stylishly designed for casual dining. Actual family photos decorate the walls, lending authentic charm. The music was too loud on a recent visit, but we haven't noticed this other times. They feature European sports daily for the lunch crowd (super sandwiches and deli items) and are a unique place to stop in and recharge during the workweek. Lunch or dinner, Nona Rosa's is a hot new contender in town. ☺



EAT IT

WHAT: Nona Rosa's

WHEN: 10:30am-10pm daily

WHERE: 113 E. Magnolia St.

INFO: 733-8100