



## Review: Sardina's -- A neighborhood Italian more neighbors should know

By Laura Longero • llongero@rgj.com • August 18, 2010

There's something to be said for the mom-and-pop restaurant, a spot in which the family invests every cent it has in a dream.

Sometimes mom-and-pops work out, and sometimes they don't, but it seems such restaurateurs always are passionate about what they do.

Sardina's Italian Restaurant tucked away in a strip mall in southeast Reno is just such a place. The restaurant is small -- there only are about nine tables, with four seats at the modest bar.

One wall of Sardina's sports a mural of a couple being waited on by a black-jacketed waiter. A similarly styled image of a chubby, mustachioed chef carrying a turkey platter decorates the door to the kitchen. Black-and-white checkered floor tiles are whimsical, as are ceiling trellises from which faux grapevines and clusters dangle.

A gurgling water fountain and piped in jazz create a romantic -- but still family friendly -- atmosphere.

### Solid performance

One appetizer features discs of mozzarella that are breaded, fried crisp and served atop a bed of greens, along with a sidecar of marinara to cut the richness of the cheese. The mozzarella is gooey and almost perfect, save one round that's cold in the middle, and sign it wasn't cooked long enough.

Antipasti for two brings a generous selection of Italian meats (coppa, salami, prosciutto), Italian cheeses, pepperoncini, briny kalamata olives and pickled artichoke hearts. There's also a bread basket and a bowl of herbed vinaigrette.

Antipasto, of course, can be fun because diners create their own small bites -- prosciutto, mozzarella and pepperoncini for one, salami and olives for another.

Herby minestrone delivers bite-size chunks of vegetables. The soup is thicker than other minestrone I've tried, but this doesn't bother me -- I like hearty soups. Top the minestrone with as much grated parmesan as you like.

Spaghetti marinara with meatballs calls out to my companion, and with good reason. The meatballs are the size of baseballs and flecked with herbs and pine nuts.

The marinara, generously ladled atop the pasta, is a bit too sweet and thick. It needs a dash of red pepper, a sprinkle of salt and splash of acid -- red wine vinegar, perhaps? -- to balance matters.

Meat and cheese ravioli are made in house; I try them blanketed in spicy vodka sauce. The ravioli filling is rich but still mild, and the pasta is cooked properly. The sauce does pack heat even for me, an avowed spice lover. The heat enlivens what is often a tired sauce at many restaurants.

Veal saltimbocca features two thin pieces of veal that are topped with prosciutto and melted fontina cheese and sautéed in Marsala wine sauce. A tangle of spaghetti and a medley of carrots, haricots verts and squash come alongside.

The veal is tender and toothsome, and I love the savory notes of cow, pig and cheese balanced by the sweet wine. The dish is luxurious, and Sardina's executes it well.

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### Helping the needy

Desserts are excellent.

I've always been impressed with Sardina's cannoli, and they don't disappoint on recent visits. Crisp (but not brittle) shells are stuffed with a smooth, slightly sweet ricotta mixture dotted with small chocolate chips, and then drizzled with chocolate sauce. I love the way the shells give way between your teeth and reveal their creamy interiors.

A seasonal offering is strawberry and sparkling wine granita. The granita has the heady sweetness of fresh strawberries in summer. I don't detect the sparkling wine, but no matter -- the granita is delightfully fresh, and the strawberry flavor is enough to carry the dish.

My party and I are the only table in the restaurant one night. The server -- and, I suspect, also the owner -- cheerfully refills water, offers additional cocktails and paces the meal appropriately.

In addition to its dining room service and catering, Sardina's teams with the Reno Gospel Mission to host Sardina's Community Café, a gathering of volunteers who prepare and serve monthly meals to the homeless at the restaurant.

I hope more Renoites find their way to Sardina's, an appealing neighborhood restaurant serving up affordable Italian fare.



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Sardina's Italian Restaurant & Catering features whimsical images on one wall and the kitchen door. (Alicia Santistevan/RGJ)

#### SARDINA'S ITALIAN RESTAURANT & CATERING

Address: 3314 S. McCarran Blvd., at Mira Loma Drive

Hours: 4:30 to 9 p.m. Monday through Saturday

Phone: 775-828-0105

Price range: Entrées \$9 to \$20

Children's menu: Yes

On the Web: [www.sardinasitalian.com](http://www.sardinasitalian.com)

Overall: 3 1/2 (out of 5 stars)

Food: 3 1/2

Service: 3 1/2

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