

**the dining companion**

By Andrea Clurfeld

# La Cucina di Nadia aims to charm, and it succeeds

**C**all her Nadia, the woman supervising the dining room at this casual cafe of a restaurant that sits in front of the Ocean Place Hilton in Long Branch, and if you're worried that would be getting a little too personal at first meeting, well, don't. Nadia won't hear of anything approaching anxiety, not in her restaurant, not in her food haven.

La Cucina di Nadia is the name of the warm, cozy, but not too small place run by Nadia Corso, who offers proof in the form of an 8-month-old in her arms that she's a grandmother, but her ballerina looks and size say otherwise. You can't help but smile at the hope of it all, but a few bites into the food cooked up at this thoroughly captivating spot offers other reasons for Nadia's well-being: If she's been eating this well all her life, it's no wonder she's such an enviable specimen.

In the crowded field of Italian restaurants at the Jersey Shore, few stand out: La Cucina di Nadia does. Not that it wants to be anything more than a modest, everyday sort of Italian restaurant; no, it doesn't seek to impress with pretensions, nor does it give off airs of grandeur. Nadia, the restaurant, aims to feed in a soothing, friendly, comfortable environment. In being its all-natural self, Nadia charmed me, warmed me and made me want to come back more than any other Italian restaurant in recent memory. I just loved this place.

Perhaps it was the zucchini cake, offered upon arrival by Nadia herself, who noted that she made it herself. "Tell me if you like it," she said, eyes at once hopeful and confident. We liked it, just as we liked the simple, savory starters we selected to rev up our appetites. The grilled portobellos were beefy and sultry, good mushrooms treated right on the grill. A toss of nicely cooked broccoli rabe and white cannellini beans proved a winning combo, the buttery beans and the piquant, slightly bitter broccoli playing off each other like a couple of pros on stage. Our sophisticated choice drew oohs and lots of ahs as we passed the shrimp

Grand Marnier around the table: Spiked with saffron, flecks of prosciutto and a dash of orange juice, this top-drawer dish was served with a phyllo pastry shell that lapped up the sauce.

The savvy foodie who recommended I try Nadia raved about the pizzas, and he was right to do so. Brick-oven baked, these small pies are appealing appetizers or lovely light meals. Good, thin crisp crusts come with a variety of snappy toppings, though I'm not sure it would be possible for me ever to pass up the prosciutto pizza, topped as it is with pieces of that exquisite imported ham, sun-dried tomatoes, gorgonzola and tomatoes. It's a no-talk experience, if you catch my drift. Also fine, especially if you like your pies simple and light, is the grilled seasonal vegetable pie, dappled the night of our visit with peppers, zucchini, broccoli and tomatoes.

Pastas here are a happy lot, particularly the feisty rigatoni strewn with pieces of chicken, strands of spinach and roasted peppers before being tossed in a spirited, perfectly balanced garlicky olive oil sauce. Angel hair pasta with rock shrimp and tomato escaped blandness thanks to an ethereal, fruity olive oil base. My happy dining companions might disagree, but the only miss in this department for me was the fettuccine with salmon, tossed in a rich mascarpone cream sauce that to my tastes was a bit heavy on the nutmeg. I'd prefer another accenting flavor in the cream sauce as a better foil to the good salmon. Dinner salads are perky mixes of greens topped by (seeded, thankfully) plum tomatoes and a roaring balsamic vinaigrette that was a tad too liberally applied.

Chicken alla Nadia, with sweet sausage and tender roasted eggplant, was enlivened by a soulful brandied brown sauce that fairly danced off the pieces of chicken. The grand-slam of the entrees was a special I hope these folks keep around for you all to sample — a dazzling plate of thin slices of veal scolloppine accented by asparagus, artichokes and capers, all ladled with a wonderfully earthy, woody sauce.

In the dessert department, you'll want to save room for the exceptionally light, super-fresh ricotta cheesecake and the bold, espresso-spiked tiramisu, one of the better renditions around. Chocolate-covered strawberries were nice, but need to be served with real whipped cream, not whipped

**LA CUCINA DI NADIA**

46 South Broadway  
 Long Branch  
 (908) 222-4488



★ ★

**ATMOSPHERE:** Pleasant cafe-style restaurant with brick oven looming large and inviting in the background. It's BYOB now, but there are plans to acquire a liquor license. Call to check. Dress is casual but neat.

**SERVICE:** Helpful, informed, enthusiastic, glad you came.

**BEST DISHES:** Grilled portobellos, broccoli rabe with beans, shrimp Grand Marnier, prosciutto pizza, rigatoni with chicken, spinach and peppers, angel hair with rock shrimp, veal with asparagus, chicken alla Nadia, tiramisu, cheesecake.

**PRICE RANGE:** Soups, salads, appetizers: \$2.95 to \$6.95. Pizza: \$4.95 to \$6.95. Pastas: \$7.95 to \$12.95. Entrees: \$11.95 to \$18.95.

**CREDIT CARDS:** V, MC, Discover

**HOURS:** 5 to 10 p.m. Sunday through Thursday; 5 to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday.

**RESERVATIONS:** Accepted.

**WHEELCHAIR ACCESS:** All on ground level.

**NONSMOKING SECTION:** Yes.

**★ ★ ★ ★ ★**

**What the stars mean**

★★★★ Outstanding. Highest standards met in its price category.

★★★★ Excellent. Stands far ahead of other restaurants in its price category.

★★★ Very Good. Significantly above average for restaurants in its price category.

★★ Good. Above average in its price category.

★ Satisfactory. No special qualities set it apart from other restaurants in its price category.

Poor: Below average in its price category.

Andrea Clurfeld visits all restaurants anonymously and rates them on food, value, service, physical comfort and ambiance — in that order. The Press pays for her meals. Free meals for review are not accepted.

topping; the pastry cream in the napoleon also had that too-sweet taste. For those looking to finish on a light note, there's a fruit plate, which starred melons the night of our visit.

Moral of this tale of a tasty dinner: Call her Nadia, and call on Nadia in her food haven that may well become your food heaven.

□ Andrea Clurfeld is the Press restaurant critic. The Dining Companion appears Sundays.

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