

## Dining

### All in the Famiglia

Family-run dining at Campania Ristorante in Branford.

By Jane Rushmore

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Thursday, December 18, 2008

#### Campania Ristorante

84 E. Main St., Branford; (203) 483-7773,

[campaniaristorante.com](http://campaniaristorante.com).

Hours: Mon., Wed.-Sat., 12 p.m.-10 p.m.; Sun., 1 p.m.-10 p.m. All major CC.

Tucked in a little plaza in Branford, Campania Ristorante sits in an old house converted into a restaurant. Partly because of this renovation, when you walk in the door you feel as though you've walked into someone's home.

There's a fire flickering in the fireplace and across the way a bar and a couple tables can seat about 20. A few stairs lead down into the intimate dining room; it seats about 60 at full capacity. The small size and walls are reminiscent of a cave, though a cozy one with chandeliers.

Many Italian restaurants claim to make you feel a part of the family when you dine there, but not all accomplish the goal. Campania is an exception. It's a family affair, run by the Solevo family, and their hospitality makes you feel like a long lost friend.

Ron runs the kitchen, Nancy runs the front of the house and "everything else" as she puts it. Their children — two sons and a daughter — fill in wherever needed, waiting tables, ordering food and helping in the kitchen.

The family isn't new to the restaurant world — Ron's parents started Antonio's in East Haven in 1972. They just sold the business a few years ago and decided to try again in Branford. The Solevo family bought the Campania space last year, and named it after the region of Italy where the family comes from. They spent two months renovating and just celebrated their one-year anniversary in November.

The food is served "Antichi Sapori"-style with flavors of the "Old World."

We dined with friends, and everyone shared plates, starting with fried calamari (\$10.95). The batter was light and crispy, melting in your mouth to expose a soft, fresh ring of squid.

We followed it up with insalata Caprese (\$7.95) drizzled in olive oil and portobello alla griglia balsamico (\$8.50). The insalata was simple and delicious — the mozzarella mild and smooth, the tomatoes ripe and the basil bursting with flavor. The mushroom can present a challenge with being tough, but this one was cooked just shy of tender. Marinated in balsamic vinegar and topped with creamy goat cheese, the portobello was sweet, sour and soft, finished off with more fresh basil leaves for an herby ending.

For main entrees, pasta seemed a natural choice. The lobster tagliatella (\$22.95) is described on the menu as a "delicate tomato cream Prosecco sauce," with emphasis on the delicate. The



Kathleen Cei Photos

Co-owners Ron and Nancy Solevo. To process through the photo gallery below, click on the right-hand side of each image.

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pasta was cooked wonderfully al dente, and allowed to shine because it wasn't drenched in a heavy sauce. Halved tomatoes, still steaming, added bright red color to the dish, along with the massive hunks of lobster meat we pulled out from under heaps of pasta, whole claws still intact.

The penne alla vodka (\$12.95) did justice to its name, Campania being one of the rare places where you can actually taste a hint of vodka in the vodka sauce, again with a subtlety to the dish. We paired it with a softball-sized side of meatball (\$5.50).

The gnocchi woodsmen (\$16.95) smelled earthy and tasted divine – the gnocchi was complemented by portobello, arugula and roasted peppers, then tossed in a rosemary and Madeira wine reduction. The secret to success on this dish was the texture – the gnocchi were pan-fried to give them a crunchy bite offset by the slippery, buttery finish from the frying.

The rack of lamb (\$29.95) off the daily specials list was served in a dish large enough to feed a family. It fell off the bone, only to be dragged through the port wine reduction, simmered down to be thick and potent. Sweet potato cubes were pan-fried as well, brown and crispy on the outside while soft and sweet on the inside.

After all the sharing we split a dessert too. Nancy makes all the pastries and we were perplexed by the creme brulee cheesecake (\$6.95). How could it be both? Would the top be flambé? Would it be served in a ramequin, or with a crumb crust? A slice of cheesecake, with crust but no flambé, arrived. We were mildly disappointed until we dug in. It was creamy, but lighter than any cheesecake, and flecks of vanilla bean gave it a richness. The crust was moist and tasted of caramel and butterscotch.

We left stuffed, debating which dish was the favorite (the gnocchi woodsmen), whether it was the best Italian in Connecticut (definitely a contender) and when we could schedule our next visit (not soon enough).

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