

From Garden to You: Z. Bardhi's Delights

The Accidental Food Critics
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Given the current economic situation, many of us decided not to travel this summer. But that doesn't stop us from longing for a trip to a quiet Italian village, where we can sit in a garden, sip wine and share authentic Italian cuisine.

At lunchtime on a recent day, we were trying to figure out just such a place to enjoy the slightly cooler than scorching day. Z Bardhi's Italian Cuisine has been a favorite for dinner, and we were pleasantly surprised to find that it serves lunch.

As we crossed the beautiful patio to enter the restaurant, we started our journey to that quaint Italian location we so craved. Crisp white tablecloths adorned tables that were surrounded by a wonderful vegetable garden, blooming flowers, vines and a fountain creating a relaxing sound.

Inside we were greeted by our soon-to-be server David, a cozy old world ambiance and a beautiful wood bar... we were now in Italy! Opting to dine outside, we were ushered to a table where we could sit under whirling ceiling fans that created the perfect temperature.

Tomatoes, peppers, basil and rosemary are just a few of the items that grow in the Z Bardhi's garden. We were amazed at how fruitful it was when chef and co-owner Zeke Bardhi told us that whenever his brother visits from New Jersey, he loves to work in the garden.

The special of the day was Stuffed Banana Peppers served over angel hair pasta with a spicy marinara sauce. Gazing upon the gorgeous banana peppers growing in the garden, we decided to order the dish, hoping it would be made with those peppers. Sure enough, Chef Zeke came from the kitchen, picked two banana peppers and disappeared back in the kitchen to create our meal. Stuffed with sausage and cheese, the peppers were tender, mildly spicy and full of flavor. The fresh marinara sauce was also perfectly seasoned, with a bit of heat to complement but not overpower the wonderful banana pepper flavor. The angel hair pasta was cooked to perfection.

We are, however, getting ahead of ourselves by discussing the pepper dish. Z. Bardhi's bakes

fresh bread every day which is served warm upon your arrival with sundried tomato, rosemary and garlic-infused olive oil. Trust us — this is not to be missed! We ordered a small Pizza Melanzane, which had a nice crisp, thin crust topped with eggplant, tomatoes, basil and mozzarella. It was fresh, non-greasy and bursting with flavors from the garden. You could easily split a pizza and have a salad for a nice light lunch. However, this was just an appetizer for our lovely meal in the garden.

After feasting on fresh hot bread dipped in oil and crispy pizza, we were served our meals — the stuffed peppers plus the Lobster Ravioli. "Gorgeous" is not too strong a word for the plate of ravioli that David placed in front of us. Brightly colored fresh tomatoes adorned the playfully striped ravioli that held the rich cheese and lobster mixture. A white wine sauce completed the dish.

During our meal, Chef Zeke teased us by bringing out not only loaves of his baked bread, but a Georgia Peach Cheesecake fresh from the oven. We oohed and ahhed over the work of culinary art. Unfortunately, it needed to cool, so we couldn't have it for dessert that day. Instead, we chose the fresh blueberry-ricotta Carla Cheesecake. Light as air, this mouth-watering treat was not covered with blueberries as you might expect. Z Bardhi's bakes them into the cake, then tops it with whipped cream. Teamed with fresh-brewed coffee, it was perfection as we sat, listened to the fountain and enjoyed our visit to an Italian garden tucked away in Tallahassee.

Z Bardhi's has been a fixture on the dining scene for 14 years and is family owned and operated. There are a few things you should know about this treasure — there is live music just about every Friday night, the restaurant also caters, it's a great place to have group activities and, most importantly, the staff will make you feel like family even if it's your first visit.

Swing in for lunch and go back for dinner, drinks and entertainment — we know you won't be disappointed!