

CONNECTICUT DINING | LAKEVILLE

Named for a Car and Following Its Lead



Wendy Carlson for The New York Times

As compact and stylish as its namesake, Cafe Giulia offers a variety of regional Italian dishes.

By WENDY CARLSON
Published: December 30, 2011

THE first thing diners notice at [Cafe Giulia](#), in Lakeville, is the little Italian race car parked on the lawn out front — a good landmark, but an even better teaser for what to expect inside.

Related

Times Topic: [Connecticut Dining](#)

Follow @NYTMetro

Connect with @NYTMetro on Twitter for New York breaking news and headlines.



[Enlarge This Image](#)



Wendy Carlson for The New York Times

Cafe Giulia is named for Alfa Romeo Giulia, an Italian race car, with a retired model parked on the

Like its namesake, the Alfa Romeo Giulia, the restaurant is compact and stylish. Cream-colored walls, contemporary drop-down lighting and plain wooden tables and flooring give it a clean, minimalist look.

The same aesthetic applies to the cuisine. The food is simple and, when the kitchen is on its game, very good — with a focus on house-made pastas married with fresh seasonal ingredients. And yet the one-page menu offers a surprisingly varied selection of intriguing regional dishes.

Nearly all the starters we sampled were rich in texture and taste. Thin artichoke slices in the artfully composed carciofi fritti were fried to a soft crunchiness and piled next to a

restaurant's front lawn.

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Wendy Carlson for The New York Times

A chocolate hazelnut torte with whipped cream and hazelnut gelato.

tender, peppery arugula salad showered with Parmesan shavings. A traditional rendition of trevisano alla griglia featured long, slender radicchio leaves that were lightly roasted, their bitterness tamed by the interplay of balsamic and sweet parmigiano. The garlicky gulf shrimp in the gamberetti were cooked perfectly to a translucent sheen, and accented with smoked paprika, chilies and croutons. The fried calamari — tender pieces of squid soaked in milk, dipped in polenta and fried for less than a minute — were light, crisp and sublime when dipped into the piquant Dijon and anchovy sauce. And roasted Vermont quail,

nearly a meal in itself, was well paired with polenta and skirted with a dried cherry and juniper compote.

Robert Willis, the executive chef and owner, first opened Cafe Giulia in 2009, in a much larger building nearby. Last spring he downsized, moving the restaurant to a storefront on Main Street, close to Lime Rock Park, where he races vintage cars (that's his retired Alfa out front). He lives above the restaurant, which may be why Cafe Giulia, where aromas of garlic and olive oil waft forth from the open kitchen into a cozy, convivial dining area, feels more like a home than a business.

That homey element may have been taken a step too far on my first visit, a Sunday, which was reminiscent of leftover day at my house. Several dishes were off the mark: a pork tenderloin special in a murky cream sauce was overcooked, the bucatini amatriciana was bland and a chocolate hazelnut torte was stale. But judging from our positive experiences on subsequent visits, which included a sampling of the same dishes, this was an aberration on a day when places that cater mostly to weekenders are sometimes not at their best and when, I later learned, Mr. Willis was not in the kitchen.

In fact, my visits on two Saturday evenings exceeded my expectations in every way. My guests and I occupied a window alcove table with a view of the tree-lined street, a setting made more intimate thanks to the acoustic panels above that allowed just enough Frank Sinatra to filter through. Somewhere between the excellent appetizers and the barbabietola salad — a lovely combination of roasted baby beets, salty Gorgonzola and a citrus-Champagne vinaigrette — we noticed Mr. Willis making his rounds among the patrons, laughing, chatting and generally infusing a little “Roman Holiday” into this Currier and Ives corner of the state.

Most of the primi dishes, priced \$20 or less, were nicely done, including bucatini amatriciana, whose sauce, this time around, was fresh and feisty, with a fiery kick of red peppers and spicy pancetta. Another standout was lasagna di carciofi, consisting of thin spinach noodles lightly layered with artichokes, onions and ricotta, altogether a rich assemblage that was astonishingly light. The linguini alle vongole, flat noodles blended with New Zealand cockles, lacked briny freshness. But the fettuccini al limone, a lighter alternative to the traditional, Titanic-sinking fettuccini Alfredo, was a delicate mingling of lemon, parmigiano and pepper with a sparse — perhaps too sparse — amount of cream. A more satisfying choice was the Maine mussels, with squid-ink spaghetti when served as a primi, but sautéed in white wine, mustard, garlic and cream sauce as a secondi.

Among other secondi dishes, the pollo al mattone, half a chicken infused with rosemary and garlic and served with roasted potatoes and sautéed French green beans, was pleasingly moist inside and wonderfully crispy outside. And a beautifully seared organic Scottish salmon with anchovy butter, resting atop a bed of roasted potatoes, paired nicely with a delightful beet risotto. Many dishes use locally sourced meat and poultry, including

the roasted lamb chops, which were slightly unctuous, but savory, as was the roast duck with Bosc pear sauce.

Desserts, all house-made, included a decadent chocolate hazelnut torte (a vast improvement over that Sunday torte) served with a scoop of hazelnut gelato on one side and a dollop of whipped cream on the other. The ricotta-mascarpone cheesecake and the tiramisu were as promised, light and airy. But the perfect ending to these Roman repasts was the affogato, a little scoop of pistachio gelato drowned in a shot of espresso.

Cafe Giulia

329 Main Street

Lakeville

(860) 435-9765

cafegiuliact.com

WORTH IT

THE SPACE Cozy and intimate with 12 tables, seating 34. Several wrought-iron tables with umbrellas for outside dining in warmer weather. Wheelchair accessible.

THE CROWD A range of ages, from mature couples in tweedy jackets to young weekenders in country casual and families with teenagers in slouchy varsity sweats. Helpful and knowledgeable staff.

THE BAR A four-stool bar serves only beer and wine. Carafes of red and white wine are \$9; bottled varietals, \$24 to \$75. Limited selection of imported and domestic beer, \$2.50 to \$5.

THE BILL Antipasti, \$8 to \$14; [salads](#), \$9; [pasta](#) dishes, \$16 to \$18; other entrees, \$20 to \$28. Major credit cards accepted.

WHAT WE LIKED Carciofi fritti, roast gulf shrimp, roasted quail, trevisano alla griglia, fried calamari, salad of roasted local baby beets, lasagna di carciofi, roasted duck breast, pollo al mattone, salmon with beet risotto, tiramisu, chocolate hazelnut torte, affogato.

IF YOU GO January to April: Open for dinner Thursday through Monday, 5:30 to 9:30 p.m. Longer hours, spring through fall, will be posted on the restaurant's Web site. Reservations recommended. Ample street parking; spaces also available behind the restaurant.

RATINGS Don't Miss, Worth It, O.K., Don't Bother.

A version of this article appeared in print on January 1, 2012, on page CT9 of the New York edition with the headline: Named for a Car And Following Its Lead.