

Venice Pizza & Grill Serves Up Fresh, Hand-crafted Dishes

When I asked Wiley, the manager/chef at Venice Pizza & Grill, what one word would describe the food at his restaurant, he said “fresh.” I wrote that in my notebook, and he pointed at it and shook his head “No,” he said, “I mean FRESH!” So I wrote it in letters one-inch high. Laughing, he shook his head again, and indicated with his hands about two feet apart how high those letters should be.

Does that give you an idea of the freshness of the foods served at Venice Pizza & Grill? Nothing here originates in frozen form that is simply reheated. Sauces are made from scratch. Breads are baked on the premises - twice a day, so you get the freshest pizza crusts, calzone crusts, and pitas possible. And, no MSG is used in any dish, so you have no worries about that.

The menu is impressive: over 20 appetizers; 10 salads (with homemade breadsticks); 9 types of burgers; nearly 20 sandwich selections; 16 pasta dishes; and two dozen specialty pizzas. Or you can build your own pizza or calzone from 32 toppings. Do the math: you could eat here every day for a year and have something different each time!

Let’s explore the appetizers, for starters (pun intended): you can get traditional items such as fried mushrooms, onion rings, mozzarella cheese sticks, cheesy bread, wings, potato skins and spinach artichoke dip (one of my faves), but there are also more unusual offerings. How about pickles fried with a dill-flavored breading, served with ranch dressing? Or potato pancakes served with honey mustard sauce? Toasted cheese ravioli, anyone? Even that old standard, nachos, has been improved: their version of *Italian Nachos* adds Alfredo sauce, Parmesan cheese, and parsley to the usual sausage, tomato, peppers, and black olives.

I opted for the *Baba Ghanoush* Dip - yes, there is a decidedly Middle-Eastern flair to the menu - a wonderful combination. The dip consisted of chopped eggplant, with garlic, parsley and Tahini sauce (a paste of ground sesame seeds), garnished with tomatoes, green peppers, and olive oil. It’s served with homemade pita chunks, and it was DIVINE!

Next it was time to choose an entrée. I thought I might go the pasta route, and was close to settling on the *Pasta Milano*, which is linguini with sautéed ham, spinach, tomatoes, basil, oregano, and garlic, topped with a lemon-garlic butter cream sauce. Or, wait - maybe the veggie lasagna - or the three-cheese manicotti - too many choices! And here’s a dish that sounds intriguing: *Greek Festival Pasta*. This is linguini sautéed with gyro meat, onions, green peppers, feta cheese, and garlic. Add some olive oil sauce and garnish it with Parmesan cheese and parsley, and you have pasta with a Greek twist - mmm!

But as I watched as diners around me were served luscious-looking pizzas, I decided to build one of my own, with chicken, artichokes, fresh spinach, feta cheese, and garlic.

Venice Pizza & Grill has developed a unique way to jazz up their homemade pizza crusts: instead of stuffing the crust, as so many of the chain restaurants do, they add the favor to the edge of the crust, giving it a more sophisticated taste. You can choose from Cajun, oregano, basil and butter, Parmesan cheese, and garlic crusts - I added basil and butter to mine. The crusts come in two styles: regular or thin. And what a heavenly creation it was! Every bite was a delightful mix of flavors, with a crust sturdy enough to support them but not overwhelming the main ingredients. I ate way too much of it, and even licked the basil and butter off my fingertips!

Specialty pizzas include *BBQ Chicken*; *Italian Flagg* (tomatoes, basis, oregano, mozzarella and Fontina cheeses); *New Yorker Meatball*; *Chicken, Veal, or Eggplant Parmigiana* (that's right - on a pizza!); *Mexican Taco*; *Ali Baba's Chicken*; *All American Burger* (!); *Falafel Delight* (Hummus dip topped with falafel, red onions, tomatoes, pickles, parsley, and mozzarella - remember we're still talkin' pizza toppings, folks); *Crystal White* (alfredo sauce topped with provolone, Swiss, Fontina, and mozzarella cheeses); and *Aloha Hawaiian*. There are additional creations; you'll have to come and see to believe it.

The burgers are hand-patted, and are topped with a variety of combinations: the *Taco Burger* and the *Greek Burger* are two. If what I've described so far doesn't tempt you, the back page of the menu is crowded with a variety of sub-, gyro-, and pita sandwiches. Any of these can be served with potato pancakes instead of French fries for a nice change of pace. If I were a kid, I'd go for the macaroni wedges, or an oven-toasted cheese sandwich.

But I was not yet done - Wiley took a break from the kitchen to come out and chat, and the next thing I knew, a bowl of *Venice Chicken Gnocchi* was in front of me. Oh, my! This is a potato dumpling that's stuffed with finely chopped chicken and mozzarella cheese, then topped with your choice of a creamy white sauce or Alfredo sauce. It's all baked until piping hot, then garnished with Parmesan and parsley. It was so delicious!

If you can possibly want dessert, the options are cheesecake, chocolate cake ("the ULTIMATE chocolate cake," no less!), carrot cake, coconut cake, Venice donut bites (someone try these and tell me what they are!), tiramisu, and baklava. The baklava is made in the kitchen, and I'll admit that I snuck a piece home with me for later enjoyment....

Finally, I need to mention two new specials being offered. The first is an unlimited buffet-without-the-buffet - whaaat?? On Mondays - Saturdays, from 11 to 3:30, you can create your own pizza and eat as much as you can hold, for \$6.99 (gourmet toppings extra). Every day from 4 to 10, you can eat as much pasta as you want for \$9.99. As you finish each pizza/pasta dish, simply order another, and you'll be charged just the one price! Another special is the weekday lunch deal: two slices of pizza with 1 topping and a fountain drink for only \$3.99 (11 to 2 weekdays only).

Throughout my two-hour extravaganza, my wonderful waitress Kimberly kept my drink topped off and the dishes cleared. A special “thanks” to her for such great service! The Venice Pizza & Grill is located at 131 Robertsville Road (on the north side of the Grove shopping center) and is open 7 days a week. Monday - Thursday 10 am to 10 pm; Friday and Saturday 10 am to 11 pm; Sunday 10 am to 9 pm. You can peruse their menu on their website: venicepizzaor.com.