

If It's Alfresco Dining You Enjoy, Spring and Fall Are Prime Times at Z. Bardhi's

Restaurant Review

4½ out of 5 Hats

Food Critic Ashby Stiff

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On the terrace, the endless green of the vistas, the gray stone walls and deep red impatiens, the drifting scent of jasmine - all enhance the pleasures of creative cooking and good wines.

After the pourings, a basket of house-made Tuscan bread arrives, warm, coarse-crust and tender-centered. With it, a dish of golden olive oil with bits of sun-dried tomato for dipping.

Perfect accompaniments, these, to a studied read-through of Chefs Zeke and Enver Bardhi's creative Italian menu.

Bardhi. Is the name Italian? No, its origins are in what is now Kosovo, the country from which a young Zeke Bardhi fled to Italy to escape an oppressive communist regime. In this new land he learned the chef's art, a calling that would take him from Milan to New York and, somehow or other, finally to a small pizzeria of his own on Tallahassee's North Monroe Street near Lake Jackson.

So successful was that pizza stop that, in late 1993, he was able to buy and convert a one-time real-estate developer's office - a vestige of the log-walled alpine chalet architecture popular in the past mid-century - on Kinhega Drive in Killlearn Lakes Plantation. Fifteen years later, his now-grown son Enver has joined his father in the kitchen.

Z. Bardhi's appetizers, priced \$9 to \$12, run to Cozze Alla Marinara, its mussels steamed in spicy marinara sauce, and Marsala-Glazed Stuffed Mushrooms. Our shared choice one evening was an order of Calamari Fritta, the tender, crisply fried strips of squid paired deliciously with the thick, highly seasoned marinara sauce served to the side.

Another time we split a starter of Lobster Ravioli in a white wine, garlic and tomato sauce. Chef Zeke attributes the near buttery tenderness of his made-in-house pastas to secrets shared by his friend Chef Albert Ughetto, who originated Albert's Provence.

Salads, a la carte at \$7 and \$10, produced a cracking-good Greek version, family style, complete down to the anchovies and kalamata olives. Dressed with a light vinaigrette, it was more than generous enough for two. The next visit's picks brought a house choice with artichoke hearts, Roma tomatoes and olives, and a Caesar, its classic Parmesan topping uniquely shaved in paper-thin sheets.

Five pasta choices, priced from \$14 to \$20, included Penne Arrabbiata, its penne sautéed with tomatoes, black olives and fresh garlic in that spicy marinara sauce. Also Linguine with Clams or Mussels and Baked Lasagna Bolognese with meat and three cheeses.

Specialty pizzas, too - five choices, each in three sizes. Superior though it reportedly is, we are not about to devote an evening at Z.Bardhi's to pizza.

Among main courses, the day's special dishes were so enticing that we delayed ordering from the set menu for a second visit. Our guest's Crab Stuffed Snapper, topped with a sauce of cherry tomatoes, olive oil and garlic and served on saffron risotto with spinach, was the essence of fresh perfection. A winning choice at \$24.

Like-priced Pastitsio, an original adaptation of the popular Greek baked dish, layered grouper, shrimp, goat cheese, sautéed mushrooms and pasta into an imaginatively flavorful dish. Also recommended, when on offer.

From the menu, on a return dinner visit, Chicken Piccata (\$19), its breast medallions sautéed with white wine, capers, lemon and butter, presented with fresh vegetables and ravioli, pleased a companion's affinity for lemon-flavored dishes.

In the accommodating Italian chefs' tradition, our hosts readily substituted a superb marsala and mushroom sauce for piccata to create Veal Marsala. Price, \$22.

Chosen from trays presented by attentive young servers, Chocolate Pecan Caramel Torte, Carla's Blueberry Cheesecake, Chocolate Blackberry Cheesecake and Strawberry Shortcake, each dolloped with rich and unmistakably real whipped cream, provided just the right finales to two superb dinner evenings.