

# POWERHOUSE *pizzeria*

by the Mangiabuono Family

Panino's has been enjoying steady growth since it was launched in 1997, and with good reason. The family-owned chain serves up stellar pizza in several different incarnations, plus a dizzying array of other menu items that stand head-and-shoulders above standard pizzeria fare.

The lively little eatery got its start in Evanston, and has since branched out into Park Ridge and Chicago's Lakeview neighborhood. My family paid a visit to the Park Ridge location, where brisk carryout and delivery service peacefully co-exists with sit-down dining in a small, stylish space accented with Italian prints, wood paneling and marble table-tops.

With thin-crust, pan, stuffed and Neapolitan to pick from, and countless toppings at our beck and call, we almost came to blows over the pizza order. We finally settled on thin-crust with pepperoni, sausage and cremini mushrooms, and Neapolitan with lasagna topping, and we couldn't have been happier. (What's not to like about a pizza topped with ricotta, mozzarella, Parmesan, meatballs, tomato sauce, olive oil and basil?)

On the appetizer end of the menu, the fried calamari were crisp on the outside, tender on the inside, and the bruschetta came piled high with tomatoes, dressed in just the right amount of olive oil and garlic, and topped with fresh mozzarella, shredded basil and roasted red peppers as an added plus.

I don't usually comment on soups that come with the meal, but the minestrone was uncommonly flavorful and light, as was the spinach and egg drop, and the creamy chicken and rice tasted just like chicken pot pie! The raspberry vinaigrette on my sister-in-law's spinach salad was sweeter than you'd expect, but blended amiably with the goat cheese, walnuts and mushrooms that came along

for the ride.

The veal dish sampled by my wife and the chicken dish ordered by my niece's boyfriend both took unexpected but enjoyable turns. The veal Fiorentina featured a contrarian accompaniment of spinach, fresh mozzarella and roasted red peppers, and the chicken Vesuvio came breaded (if you can believe it), with green peas and red peppers adding pop to the traditional roasted potatoes in olive oil, garlic and white wine.

The vodka sauce that graced my daughter's cavatelli and my niece's tortellini was tangy and chunky with only a hint of cream. And the sauce on my mom's capellini pomodoro had a flavor reminiscent of Nonna Mangiabuono's. The meatballs my mom ordered on the side were dense, tender and moist, and bathed in the best of the red sauces that we sampled.

My brother loved his gnocchi in meat sauce, and it's a good thing that the portion on my dad's fettuccini Alfredo was ample, because it was pretty much polished off by the rest of the assemblage.

The standout pasta dish was a paradoxically rich-but-light cheese tortellini al fresco featuring loads of artichoke hearts, tomato chunks, shaved parmesan and shredded basil in a garlic-olive oil sauce.

As full as you'd be after consuming even half of the above, you can't leave without sampling the fried dough drizzled with hot Nutella and the Pizzookie. (That's right! It's a "pizza" made of chocolate chip cookies, homemade vanilla gelato, caramel and chocolate sauce, and a dusting of powdered sugar!)

The service at Panino's is skillful and friendly, and the servings are more than generous, but the best news is the price, which clocks in at about half the final bill at fancier restaurants.



## ▲ PANINO'S PIZZERIA

*Panino's has a passion for pizza that shows in every incarnation, especially the Neapolitan version. Their artisan pizza dough is leavened with a "mother" strain of yeast called camaldoli that traces its roots to 19th-century Naples, when the first pizza was created. The flour — Molino "San Felice" Farina Tipo "00" — also comes from Naples, where it is known as the "Queen of Neapolitan Flour." Rather than adding sugar and olive oil, Panino's allows their dough to sweeten naturally during a 48-hour "cold ferment" in the fridge, after which it is allowed to rise in the kitchen, unpunched, for four hours before baking in a high-temperature brick oven. Excess dough is used the next day to bake some of the best restaurant bread we've tasted.*



■ **LOCATION:** 3935 W. Devon Ave., Chicago

■ **HOURS:** Monday-Thursday, 11 a.m.-9:30 p.m.; Friday, 11 a.m.-10 p.m.; Saturday, noon-10 p.m.; Sunday, 3-9 p.m.

■ **PRICES:** \$4-\$12.95; pastas, \$13.50-\$19.95; entrees, \$14.95-\$20.95; desserts, \$5-\$6

■ **LIBATION:** BYOB

■ **FEATURES:** Carryout, delivery & catering

■ **ATTIRE:** Casual

■ **PHONE:** 847-823-3450

■ **WEB:** [www.paninospizzeria.com](http://www.paninospizzeria.com)