



## The Star-Ledger

### Gaetano's manifests Red Bank renaissance

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For the Star-Ledger

Red Bank has always been a town of character -- and of characters -- long before its renaissance as one of the trendiest spots in New Jersey, the kind of place where you can buy Jimmy Choo shoes, Marc Ecko jeans and relax afterward in a cigar bar.

Trends aside, its authentic energy has always set Red Bank apart. The people who live and work here are not posers; they have passion and personality. And Gaetano's, which was part of the renaissance (it opened in 2000), is one of the restaurants that prove that point.

Gaetano's appears to be a quiet, unassuming bistro just off Broad Street. Décor is streamlined, simple -- wooden tables, ceramic floors. But it's a lively restaurant with a menu that bursts with creativity. The daily specials list boasted 19 dishes. How to choose? Ask the waiter. Ours was exceptionally knowledgeable about the strengths of the kitchen.

First he recommended the calamari calabrese (\$13.95), fried and tossed in a spicy caponata sauce, with triangles of flat bread brushed with an olive pesto. This is how they eat it in Greece, he told us. You'll have trouble going back to the deep-fried rubbery rings that pop out of so many Jersey kitchens. This calamari was delicate and oh-so-light. The marinated tomatoes in the caponata were an excellent counterpart. This appetizer is huge, but everyone at the table will want a bite, even those who swear to hate calamari.

Another shockingly generous appetizer was the special arugula and crab salad (\$13.95) served with roasted peppers and asparagus with a whole grain mustard and balsamic vinaigrette. So much crab! And the vinaigrette was perfectly temperate.

Pastas are kitchen-made, so you must order one. An appetizer portion of lobster ravioli (\$7.95) was impressive -- dreamy pillows of pasta overstuffed with lobster and ricotta in a tomato basil cream sauce. (By summer, you'll be able to buy the pastas and sauces made by chef Dago Sanchez.)

The grilled jumbo African prawn (\$12.95) came whole, served over mesclun greens with a blood orange vinaigrette. What a treat. (Offer to share or you won't be forgiven.) The marinated grilled hangar steak was overwhelming. The sauce (shallots and porcini in a brandy crème) seemed recklessly abundant, and the parmigiano risotto was far too heavy.

The restaurant doesn't have a liquor license, but is allowed to sell bottles exclusively from Westfall Winery in Montague. Our waiter recommended the Sangiovese, but we weren't impressed. You may still bring your own bottle. Or try the sangria, so popular in summer that the restaurant goes through cases of oranges weekly.

The dessert menu offered pignoli cookies, and we were thrilled; they've been an addiction ever since we hit world-famous Mike's Pastry in Boston's North End. Gaetano's also sells the cookies for \$14.99 per pound, so we were hopeful. But Mike's has spoiled us. Gaetano's cookies were good, yes, but too big and too crisp. (Tip to pignoli lovers: Try Bovella's in Westfield.) Better was the kitchen-made zabaglione (\$6.50) with fresh strawberries and ladyfingers -- so light, so creamy. We had heard good things about the coffee, but it was too meek to compete with the energy of the food. The espresso was good.

We were impressed with the bold energy of the kitchen and by the presence of general manager Jerry Murphy, who works the room, chatting with customers and proudly busing tables.

It's tough to stand out in a town like Red Bank, but Gaetano's succeeds.