

Customers at Zinna's benefit from owner's fresh farm produce

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By Susan Sprague Yeske
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Chris Zinna knows how to make things grow.

As co-owner of Catalpa Farms in Princeton Township and owner of the Growing Concern landscaping business in Cranbury, he knows how to plant, weed, sow and harvest.

These days, he's growing something completely different: Zinna's Bistro by Luca, located at the intersection of Cranbury, East Windsor and South Brunswick townships, opened in January.

"I love landscaping and I love creating things," Zinna says. "Food is the same way."

As a farmer and owner of Kingston Farm Market in Kingston, he grows and sells food, but says owning a restaurant has always been a personal dream. His friend, Luca DiMeglio, who owns Luca's in Flemington, encouraged him and helped craft the bistro's extensive menu as well as contributing recipes. DiMeglio gets a nod of appreciation in the restaurant's name.

Chef Adam Drake, a graduate of Johnson & Wales University, is in charge of most of the restaurant's culinary duties, while Zinna's primary function is management. But that doesn't keep him out of the kitchen. "I just love the kitchen and I love to be in it," he says.

To satisfy that passion, one day each week "" usually Sunday "" Zinna, wife Dawn and other family members gather in the restaurant kitchen to make the homemade pastas listed on the menu. "It's all fresh pasta, nothing is frozen," he says. Windows looking into the kitchen allow customers to watch the pasta being made.

He also is bringing his farming talents to the restaurant. In addition to planning to use Catalpa Farms produce and honey in the kitchen, he is planting 27 rows of vegetables and herbs outside Zinna's.

In the three months since it opened, Zinna's already has drawn attention as a popular spot for lunch.

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We started our meal with the house margherita pizza, \$11.99 for a 12-inch pie. Thin and crisp, with the house sauce, fresh mozzarella and fresh basil leaves, it was a satisfying start to a pleasant meal.

We also tried two of the soups, pasta e fagioli, \$4.99, and crabmeat and corn, \$5.99. The hearty pasta e fagioli was as personalized as all varieties of this Italian favorite, with beans and corkscrew pasta dominating the mild tomato flavor of the meaty broth. The crab soup was superb, with chunks of crab and bits of corn swimming in a lightly creamed golden broth.

Side salads are available for \$2.99, and the Caesar proved to be crisp and fresh with tomatoes and a nicely done dressing. Despite being billed as a side dish, it was large enough to share.

The menu includes typical Italian fare, with the Zinna family's homemade pasta the standout. Lobster Agnelotti, \$20.99 for dinner, was a generous portion of pasta pillows cooked to the perfect bite and stuffed with lobster meat and cheese, then topped with a creamy but light pink brandy sauce.

Cheese ravioli, \$12.99 for dinner, was equally well received, stuffed with a creamy mixture of mascarpone, ricotta, mozzarella and Parmigiano Reggiano cheeses. Topped with the house tomato sauce, which has a mild bite, Italian food doesn't get much better than this.

An order of spaghetti with white clam sauce, \$16.99 for dinner, was nicely done with a clam combo; some were mixed in with the white wine sauce, while a half-dozen still in their shells were perched on top. With a mild garlic finish, the sauce was light, pleasant and flavorful.

Less impressive was an order of chicken risotto, \$18.99 for a dinner portion, which arrived at the table with the liquid from the risotto visibly pooling around the edges. A small portion of chicken and several asparagus spears accompanied the large, dense serving of Arborio rice flavored with garlic, tomatoes and Parmigiano.

With family members as involved as they are at Zinna's, it's no surprise that most of the desserts are made by Chris Zinna's mother, Landi Spry.

Because her chocolate chip cookies and biscotti are sold by weight in the adjoining deli, we were able to order them in the dining room. They were nice and crunchy and a pleasant finish to the meal, as was the Lemon Drop, \$3.99, a small housemade lemon cake with a tender crumb that was topped with lemon glaze. A dish of our choice of three flavors of housemade gelato, \$4.99, also made a pleasant dessert.

Zinna's is a family restaurant, designed for families and operated by a family, and the menu is filled with traditional favorites designed to offer something for everyone in a range of prices.

It may be a new endeavor for Chris Zinna, but clearly he is embracing it with passion and energy. As his garden grows outside, so should his appreciative clientele.