

Eating Out on \$50: Barcelona's in Garfield

Eating Out on \$50 is a monthly restaurant feature. Two people determined to spend only \$50 on dinner, drinks, tax and tip will discover just how much can be purchased for so little.

By **JEFFREY PAGE**
SPECIAL TO THE RECORD

Barcelona's is known for many things – startlingly low prices, big portions and lots of flags (more on this later). It is also known for personal service you don't often encounter, something that comes with a place that's been in business at the same location since 1933.

For example, a waitress brought us a basket of bread and was about to take our drink order when she spotted one of Barcelona's regulars making his way to the dining room. She excused herself to give him a quick hug and kiss. She was concerned, she said, because she hadn't seen him in a while.

And the food?

The menu is a catalog of traditional southern Italian cooking done nicely. It includes a dozen varieties of pizza, and a wide selection of veal, chicken, beef and seafood items. There's also a small separate section listing only eggplant dishes. A less hungry diner can choose from 44 familiar pasta entrees averaging just under \$8, or 33 sandwich offerings, none higher than \$6.50.

My friend and I began with a small antipasto (\$6) – there are two larger sizes – and were asked, “Anchovies?” Am I the only person left who still enjoys these salty little fillets? Many places don't even use them on Caesar salads anymore. More is better, I said.

The antipasto turned out to be a serviceable plate of ham, salami, hard boiled egg, roasted red pepper, green olives, provolone



KEVIN R. WEXLER/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Christine Seaman, left, takes orders from a group of customers who have been coming to Barcelona's since they were teenagers.

and iceberg lettuce. And I was presented with a small dish of a half dozen anchovies.

My chicken cacciatore (\$7.50) was rich and juicy and piled high with onions, peppers, and mushrooms. The marinara was tangy enough to seize my attention, but if the kitchen had used any hot red peppers in the preparation, I missed it.

I passed on pasta and was told I could have garlicky sautéed broccoli instead. The kitchen accommodated me when I asked that it be cooked without oil, and wound up with a large dish of broccoli blanketed with chopped garlic. My friend thought it was overcooked. I found it just right.

She ordered stuffed shells (\$6.25), a dish of large tender shells filled with delicately seasoned ricotta and topped with mozzarella and marinara sauce.

When I asked, I was told that just one of the offerings on the dessert menu – a waffle sundae – was made on premises. That

sounded like too much. I ordered a slice of cheesecake (\$3), which was dense, gummy and unremarkable. If I ran an Italian restaurant I would serve only cheesecake made with light, fluffy ricotta.

A better bet than my “New York” cheesecake was an old-fashioned sundae dish filled with always reliable vanilla ice cream (\$3).

A few days after visiting Barcelona's, I phoned the owner, Jim LaRose, to ask how he manages to keep prices at bargain levels. After all, that dish of chicken cacciatore turned out to be big enough for dinner as well as lunch and a snack the next day.

“I have no mortgage. I don't live above my means. I don't drive a Jaguar,” said LaRose, whose wife Elaine is the granddaughter of Peter Barcelona, the founder. Peter passed the business to his son Frank (aka “Jiggs”), who passed it to Elaine and Jim in 1971.

“We're keeping it in the family,” LaRose, 75, said. “One of my sons works here full

Barcelona's Restaurant

■ 38 Harrison Ave., Garfield;
973-778-4930; barcelonasnj.com

- Cuisine: Italian.
- Open seven days 11:30 a.m. to 11:30 p.m.
- Credit cards: None.
- Wine/liquor: Full bar.
- Parking: Street.

time and will take over after me. Another is here part time.”

Barcelona's accepts no credit cards, which also helps keep prices down, by not incurring and passing along credit card transaction fees.

About those flags. When I got lost on the way to the restaurant, a guy in Lodi drew me a little map and told me to watch out for the flags.

Jim LaRose takes great pride in his décor. Barcelona's is decked out in real and drawn American flags. There's an illustration of the famous photo of the six Marines raising the flag on Iwo Jima. And there are signs proclaiming such sentiments as “We Support Our Troops,” “I Love the USA,” and “We Will Never Forget,” the last being part of a small memorial LaRose maintains to the victims of the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Barcelona's is the kind of local place every neighborhood needs, not necessarily fancy or gastronomically perfetto, but as all round dependable as Derek Jeter in his salad days. This will be no news if you live in the neighborhood because you know Barcelona's. It's been going since FDR's first inauguration 78 years ago.

The tab with tax and tip came to \$32.55.

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