



FOOD & DRINK

## Fitchburg gumbo

*Liliana's serves promising New Orleans fare*

By Jerry Minnich

**L**iliana's, in the amorphous suburb of Fitchburg, is the area's latest attempt at re-creating a New Orleans-style restaurant here in the northland. It is the creation of David and Tiffany Heide, who named the place after their baby daughter, and it is well worth a trip to the south (of Madison) to sample the jambalaya, gumbo, étouffée and other Creole-Cajun specialties, as well as some dishes reflecting broader French and Italian expressions of the Crescent City heritage.

The restaurant, just off Highway PD and across a parking lot from Benvenuto's, is bright, airy and cheerful at noon, comfortably romantic at night. The walls are lined with illuminated photos of New Orleans street musicians, all taken by Parry, David's father.

David, still on the shy side of 30, is a graduate of the Cordon Bleu-Minnesota. His chef de cuisine is Annie O'Hara, who was named by *Madison Magazine* as one of the city's most promising chefs, and who previously worked with David at Cocoliquot. With all this talent, you should expect exciting dishes well prepared and served, and — for the most part — your expectations will be fulfilled.

My first foray to Liliana's was a solo one, for lunch. A blackened catfish po'boy was fine, the fish fresh, well blackened, served with spicy slaw on a crunchy toasted bun, accompanied by the restaurant's homemade Cajun chips. Even the iced tea was home brewed. So far, so good.

I returned the next week for dinner with three companions. After cocktails and warm bread, we shared two appetizers. The grilled calamari with tomato-niçoise olive panzanella, field greens and smoky piquilla vinaigrette was perhaps too multicultural a dish, even for New Orleans. It didn't work. Panzanella is an Italian vegetable-and-bread salad.

**Liliana's**

2951 Triverton Pike, Fitchburg, 608-242-4444  
[www.lilianasrestaurant.com](http://www.lilianasrestaurant.com)  
11 am-2 pm Mon.-Sat., 5 am-9 pm Sun.-Sat.  
Lunch \$8-\$13, dinner entrees \$14-\$24. Parking.  
Wheelchair accessible. Nonsmoking, except on one outdoor terrace. Full bar. Reservations accepted. Major credit cards.

Niçoise is a French salad with potatoes, green beans and olives. And by the time they added the tomatoes and the Spanish piquillo vinaigrette, there apparently was no room for the calamari — there were only six of them — but that was okay, because they were dull and rubbery.

On the other hand, the crab cakes, well supplied with lump crab and well seasoned, were excellent, served with field greens and a lively citrus red pepper sauce. There were two of them, which came to — let's see — five dollars each.

One of us ordered a spinach salad with blackened chicken, bacon, grape tomatoes and apricot-mustard vinaigrette. The greens were fresh, the chicken nicely blackened, and the crisp bacon played well against the other ingredients.

Moving on to entrees, the sea scallops with ratatouille, fennel-leek mash, fried leeks and olive oil were excellent, the scallops cooked to tender perfection. Especially pleasing was the fennel-leek mash, the potatoes enlivened with — besides leeks and fennel — white wine, Pernod and garden herbs. A winner.

Andouille, chicken and blackened shrimp papardelle pasta with roasted red pepper cream sauce was another winner. The andouille, a highly spiced Cajun sausage, brought this dish to life, while the pasta and red pepper cream sauce added a welcome cushion of comfort.

The clunker of the evening was the Black Angus sirloin with potato puree and Creole tomato salad. The sirloin was tough and

gristly, and the potato puree — well, isn't this just a fancy name for mashed potatoes? In any case, as a \$24 entree, this was an expensive flop.

On the other hand, my jambalaya was fabulous, truly a Liliana's signature dish. The ingredients were authentic New Orleans, melded with fire and love. They included tasso, a hot-smoked Cajun "ham" (actually a shoulder butt) cured with cayenne and garlic; lardon, which is simply a small strip or cube of bacon; and andouille, the classic Cajun (originally French) pork sausage made with coarse pork and chitterlings, smoked with peppers, onions and wine.

These, with tomato, peppers, filé powder and other seasonings, made for a fiery (but not assaultive) dish that I will return for again. Like all dishes here, the portion was large enough to afford a reprise, at home, the following evening.

Other entrees I would like to try on future visits include the braised pork bolognese with spinach, orecchiette and Parmigiano Reggiano; shrimp and crawfish étouffée; and roasted red peppers and wild mushrooms with bucatini pasta in a pesto cream sauce.

We finished the evening by sharing a well-prepared crème brûlée and a beautiful chocolate bourbon pecan pie, full of rich pecan flavor and, thankfully, not overly sweet. The accompanying coffees were served in individual French presses, the first time I have seen this flourish offered in a Madison-area restaurant, and much admired.

Liliana's has the potential to become an iconic restaurant in the Madison area, one that elevates New Orleans-style cuisine to new local heights. The chefs are already committed to using locally produced foods in new and exciting dishes. With continued attention to quality, Liliana's should enjoy long-term success in Fitchburg. ♦

Visit [TheDailyPage.com](http://TheDailyPage.com) for reviews of inexpensive noshes, plus our Eats restaurant guide and the Food & Drink story archive.