

## Carmine's Pamela's Punch Review 3 8 11

# PAMELA'S PUNCH

QUENCH YOUR THIRST WITH PAMELA SORENSEN

### FEATURED FOOD & DRINK

## Carry It Home From Carmine's

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It's funny how you will not once step foot into a place that you may have heard of, then once you do, you are back there again and again, partly by coincidence and partly well, because you actually enjoy the venue. This was how it was with Carmine's (and please, be sensitive to the fact that after indulging there twice during last week, I am fully aware my clothing fits a bit...differently). I'd heard of Carmine's opening, actually its "soft opening" last year, but had not had the opportunity to venture inside its doors here in DC nor even in the Theatre District in New York City. I guess you could say that it found a Theatre District home here as well, across from **The Shakespeare Theatre Company's Lansburgh**, down the street from the **Verizon Center** and around the corner from the **Sidney Harman Center**.

The vibrant area near the Verizon Center, also known as Penn Quarter, Gallery Place and Chinatown has transformed into a busy, bustling, energetic upscale urban metropolis. Even during the weekend days when the rest of the nation's capital's "downtown" streets only lay eyes on touring families who may have been accidentally led astray away from the Mall, the home of DC's Carmine's is vibrant and alive. Thus, making it quite a popular place to stop in for a drink at the bar, a group dinner, a private affair or even singular spying on politicians. Apparently Carmine's has a constant parade of those on the Hill coming through, as it's not a far jaunt and provides great food.



*Carmine's fried zucchini and salads courtesy of their Facebook page*

The atmosphere can be bit overwhelming at first. The space is gi-normous. A grocery store was planning on moving in at one time and as it fell through the space seemed perfect for ownership to move in. But as you wind your way past the vast bar and into the main dining room, which is surrounded by various private rooms, attractive glass enclosed displays of temperature controlled wines, the booths, wood flooring and fairly spaced tables make for a less intimidating environment. Be mindful this is not a romantic two-some or even quiet let's-get-down-to-

business setting. It's a raucous, loud, Italian atmosphere where you find serving staff rushing in between tables with each freshly made platter, gracefully side-stepping each other like a perfectly executed ballet. It's where your waiter will cut and serve you portions at the table graciously, making conversation, telling jokes and answering questions about the food and the restaurant. It's where you may have a hand held menu, but why do that when you can look up at any of the multiple board menus there for your perusing.

It's "family-style" yes, but as those who are in the biz will tell you: "The only thing that the 'other Italian family-style place' (Maggiano's) and Carmine's have in common is that they serve Italian food." Well, yes, it's family-style, but at Carmine's every dish is made after the order has been put in, *in the kitchen*. It's not been shipped in and sitting waiting to be placed on a platter pre-made. It's also less "factory-like" and more well, "family-like". You can tell the owners and management invest a lot in their people, the food and the atmosphere to keep it from turning into a big fast Italian food joint.

In this particular property, when you go, make sure you look up at the ceiling, even in the private rooms (ask for a tour). Each chandelier is different. Not one matches another, another unique aspect to the space. And the big crystal one that blew me away in the front room near the bar? Why a gift from Penn Quarter real estate mogul **Doug Jemal**.

Ordering should be a fun experience, not stressful. Remember, each platter is made to serve "4-6" but I feel that depending on your group's appetite – it could be more. There's no shame in dividing up the leftovers and taking them home in the containers and brown shopping bags. Everyone does it. And you will be full, no matter what you say before you walk in, because the food is just that tasty. I have had a few pasta dishes, the fried zucchini, the Carmine's Salad (my favorite), chicken scallopini, eggplant parmesan, the garlic bread (to die for), and the desserts. Well. Let's say that I was quite enjoyed the bread pudding and the "Tugboat" which is not on the menu, but it's a lesser giant version of the "Titanic" the banana split (my pants!) Sundae.

Word to the wise: Don't eat a big breakfast or lunch the day of your dinner at Carmine's. Wear loose and comfortable, adjustable clothing. Park far away so you will have to walk to and fro. Feast like no one is watching. Carry the rest home with you. The leftovers are even better the next day. If you choose to have lunch, which I have done as well, follow the same instructions minus the 'feast like on one is watching' bit because you may just have to nap back at the office. Granted, you'd have a nice Cheshire Cat purr on your face and yes, every bite would be worth it.

Carmine's is located at 425 7th Street NW, at the Penn Quarter : 202.737.7770

