

Dining Downtown

with Sarah Zorn

Traversing West Orange's Main Street in search of outstanding eats

Nicholas Anthony's Family Kitchen



It's a tough tightrope for restaurants to walk — being the kind of place patrons would choose to celebrate a special occasion, and also one they'd stop into for a sandwich on a Wednesday. Yet less than a year into opening, Nicholas Anthony's has already pulled off the ultimate hat trick; emerging as a one-stop dining destination for denizens of downtown and beyond.

Certainly, it smacks of promise for West Orange's commercial corridor as a whole, by raising the bar for forthcoming eateries around it. Gamely ticking off the list of what people tend to look for in a sit-down restaurant experience, Nicholas Anthony's offers elegant ambiance, solicitous service, and an ambitious yet approachable menu; encouraging visitors to eagerly outsource dinner-making duties.

By eschewing starched white linen or checkered plastic tablecloths in favor of rustic Tuscan farmhouse trappings, Nicholas Anthony's aims to assert itself as a contemporary Italian restaurant — one that serves as an extension of the owner's home kitchen. Hence the name, naturally, and homey touches like a sideboard, from which staff fetch water, peppermills and share plates.

As for food offerings, one can always take comfort in Italian American touchstones like meatballs and eggplant parmesan. Yet, Nicholas Giambattista largely reaches well beyond the typical red sauce canon, bringing true chef perspective to the traditional Italian pantry. A constantly rotating specials menu is reliably full of whimsy and soul (think Blackened Shrimp over Cajun Risotto as an appetizer, or slow-braised Osso Bucco as a main), but the same can be said of the staple bill of fare.

You'll find Mozzarella en Carozza (deep-fried sandwich "carriages") as starters, but also an updated counterpoint in the squared-off Zucchini Fritters, which achieve a certain lightness by swapping flecks of shredded squash for the bread. Those perfect partners — peppers and potatoes — appear two ways: try the Salsiccia, a homey toss of sausage, cherry peppers and broccoli rabe, or a vegetarian assemblage of long hots, paved with hard provolone.

If the thought of entrees in the \$20-30 range make you blanch (though frankly, it's the cost of doing business nowadays, especially when you're operating with quality ingredients and without a liquor license), just know you'll be rewarded with platter-sized proteins like Cast Iron Ribeye, worthy of a steakhouse, and pasta piled by the pound and generously anointed with luxury items like crab and shrimp (as in the champagne cream-sauced Penne Nicholas Anthony). You'll find that everything serves two, or at least provides plenty of leftovers to take home — and this is coming from a charter member of the Clean Plate Club.

Nicholas Anthony's real ace in the hole, however, may be its versatility. It's romantic enough for couples, fantastic for families (a multi-course "Family Table" menu makes it ideal to eat with parties of five or more), and just as good for solo diners or on a casual night out — especially if you perch at the bar with pizza, like the caramelized onion and bacon-topped Peppered Pig.

Consider a visit to Nicholas Anthony's Family Kitchen, as an excellent excuse to take a break from yours.

450 Main Street, www.nicholasanthonys.com