

A great new place to meat

Where's the beef? At na Brasa, it's everywhere

By Len Lear

At na Brasa, which just opened in May at 680 N. Easton Rd., across the road from the Willow Grove Naval Air Station (Route 611), a mile and a half off the Pennsylvania Turnpike, about 15 to 20 minutes from Chestnut Hill, you might say there's always a thriller on the grill.

na Brasa, which means "on amber" in Portuguese (in other words, the burned wood that is still glowing and is used to grill), is a churrascaria, or authentic Brazilian steakhouse. Believe me, no matter how many steakhouses you may have been to, they are nothing like naBrasa, the only restaurant of its kind in the suburbs. (Two Brazilian steakhouses, Fogo de Chao and Chima, are in center city, but their prices are much higher than at naBrasa.)

First of all, there is no menu. A meal is a Bacchanalian parade of all-you-can-eat salads and side dishes, as well as 14 different cuts of meat plus swordfish and salmon served on skewers in theatrical style by an army of servers dressed as gauchos, the cowboys of Argentina and southern Brazil. They are fitted with the traditional billowing black pants, red neckerchiefs, wide leather belts and puffy shirts. Like bees, they buzz around the dining room, stopping at each table that is ready for main course service.

There is a card next to each plate with a "Yes" side and a "No" side. When you want meat service, you simply turn the "Yes" side face up; suddenly the gauchos race to your table as if they're riding in the Kentucky Derby and begin carving different cuts of pork, filet mignon, beef ribs, chicken, lamb, sirloin and more. And on each skewer, the gauchos can cut pieces that are rare, medium or well done, whichever you prefer. They are all slow-roasted over an open fire in mammoth quantities and rushed out to diners with military precision.

And no matter how much you eat, dinner is a fixed price of \$29.95 per person on weekdays (and \$34.95 on weekends), which is a bargain since center city traditional steakhouses charge more than that for just one filet mignon entree. You can also have only the salad buffet for \$19.95. For rich folks, as we all know, money talks; for the rest of us it just nags, but at these prices it won't nag too much.

The unlimited salad bar can easily be a meal in itself. There are more than 25 items, including cheeses, soups, breads, olives, fresh greens, hearts of palm, Italian salami, marinated mushrooms and much more. And if that is not enough, four side dishes — polenta (corn meal), mashed potatoes, fried bananas and warm cheese bread — are also brought out to each table.

Of the meat dishes we tried, our favorites were the filet mignon, pork ribs and chicken wrapped in bacon, all bursting with flavor. Needless to say, you already feel like a pregnant hippo after the salad bar and side dishes, before the meat deliveries even begin.

There is an extensive list of wines and specialty cocktails, including more than 100 wines from around the world by the bottle — with a focus on Portuguese and Spanish — and 18 by the glass. The main dining room, with its tray-molded ceiling, hardwood floors, gorgeous mahogany beams and elegant décor, combined with a private room and a second dining room, provide seating for about 220. A bottle of Cartuxa Cabernet (\$44.95), recommended by director of operations, Rui Lucas, was medium-bodied but full of luscious flavor and a perfect match for most of the meats. A French martini and Espresso martini were expertly made and reasonably priced at \$8.50 each. An even better deal is the \$6 Caipirinha, the national cocktail of Portugal, made at tableside by a lovely young lady from Brazil, Amanda Chinageia.

Most desserts are made in-house. We thoroughly enjoyed the Ripenos, a fruit sorbet (we had lemon) in a natural fruit shell (\$6) and a Dolce de leite semifreddo, which is a creamy delight with lots of caramel and hazelnuts, topped with caramel sauce (\$6).

By a complete coincidence, we happened to be seated next to a table with people we recognized. Toto Schiavone and Claire DiLullo, owners of Moonstruck in Fox Chase, which has been turning out great Italian food for three decades, had brought Toto's son, Fabrizio, to na Brasa, to celebrate his 32th birthday. After the dinner, Toto commented, "I am very

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One of the many "gauchos" at na Brasa carves up one of the 14 meat dishes that are served at tableside.

Owners Daniel DaCosta (left) of Willow Grove and Celso Leite of Montgomeryville (right) have teamed with Rui Lucas of Philadelphia (center) to open the huge na Brasa Brazilian steakhouse (220 seats) as well as the adjacent gastro pub, Iron Abbey (100 seats).

