

DAMIAN'S CUCINA ITALIANA

3011 Smith Street, Houston, Texas 77006

Damian's has always reminded me of a confident and well-established Italian restaurant in Manhattan, complete with regular clientele, whether corporate entertaining or personal dining. The first glance inside the door reveals a mouth-watering selection of antipasto right next to the entrance foyer, and to the right the eyes and ears of the arriving guest are drawn to the bar, where a well-heeled and convivial clientele sip on beverages and discuss the business of the day while waiting to be seated in the large dining room. One lucky group each night is tucked away at the Chef's Table in the kitchen, in the middle of the organized mayhem which takes place in any popular and well-run dining establishment. Hot and cold antipasti include fresh seafood tossed with tomato, onion, olives, ricotta cheese, and olive oil; paper thin marinated salmon slices with asparagus; and Fritto Misto di Mare, a combination of fried shrimp, baby squid, and mixed fish. Pasta selections include fine spaghetti with lobster tail and lump crabmeat in a tomato cream sauce, mushroom lasagna, and a luscious baked eggplant with mozzarella cheese, tomato sauce, and basil. Your main course at Damian's may be grilled trout topped with vegetables and a side of sweet potato ravioli, veal rib chop Milanese topped with pesto, pine nuts, and fettuccine, or any one of several baby veal scaloppines. AND, hope you saved room for dessert: bitersweet chocolate cake infused with oranges and Grand Marnier, hazelnut sponge cake with delicate layers of cinnamon and caramel with cocoa filling, or simply a platter or assorted Italian cookies with coffee.

BISTRO LE CEP

11112 Westheimer Road at Wilcrest, Houston, Texas 77042

"French country cooking and wine bar" says it all. This French bistro by the owner of the former Rotisserie for Beef and Bird hits all the right notes: gracious and deferential servers, warm homey ambiance, and hearty food with none of the fru-fru sometimes encountered at "French" restaurants. Prices are reasonable, and, as at Damian's, corporate entertaining commingles successfully with neighborhood couples dining tete-a-tete. I like to start with fresh mussels in white wine and garlic broth, or escargots bourguignons, followed by a chilled salade au fromage de chevre (baked goat cheese). Like its ancestor Beef and Bird, Le Cep specializes in hearty beef and game dishes, including wild boar with plum sauce and wild rice, rotisserie roasted duck with bigarade sauce, lentils and red cabbage, or pan-roasted calves liver with apples, onions, crisp bacon, and French fried potatoes. The owner's Austrian heritage shows with the milk-fed veal sautéed with mushrooms and carrots, next to a hearty serving of spatzle. A seafood speciality to be tried is Bouillabaisse a la Marseillaise. The broad selection of wines is reasonably priced, and the dessert menu is truly awesome: black bing cherries in kirsch, rhum au baba, and caramelized apple tart (tarte tatin) with French vanilla ice cream, to name a few. And, Joe, the strolling accordionist - who knows every European tune ever written - will guarantee a pleasant evening!

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Note: By way of qualifications for reviewing restaurants, Hankamer has owned and operated numerous restaurants, coffee shops, hotels, discotheques and banquet halls over the last forty years; he has travelled to over 70 countries and has studied and lived in Europe for over three years; he was co-owner of a home delivery wine of the month club and imported his own wine labels for years.

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