

PRONTO CUCININO – MANDOLA'S CASUAL ITALIAN

1401 Montrose, Houston, Texas, 77019, (713) 528-8646

This exciting new Italian concept in the close-in Westheimer / Montrose area has been buzzing with business each time Hankamer has visited. With a Cafe Express-type format of ordering at the counter, Pronto Cucinino then – instead of giving the diner a buzzing vibrating ringing little gizmo – hand delivers your order right to your table. Appetizers include Fritto Misto, fried calamari, shrimp and zucchini chips with a spicy marinara sauce; Pizza Squares for \$2.75 each; and Zuppa di Pollo, roast chicken soup. Salads are varied and fresh, and include Caesar and Spinach salads-grilled salmon, chicken or shrimp can be added to any salad for a surcharge. From the Rotisserie or Grill come Chicken Vincent, Marsala, or Parmigiano; Grilled Pork Chop topped with caramelized onion, and Spiedini, Grilled Skewered Shrimp coated in bread crumbs seasoned with garlic butter. Pasta selections include Lasagna, Ravioli, Rigatoni Rustica – large tube pasta, spicy sausage, eggplant, peas, tomato, cream & parmigiano; Linguini Diavolo, long pasta tossed with shrimp, mushrooms, olives, scallions, and spicy marinara. House specialty is Wood Roasted Lemon Garlic Chicken, served with mashed potatoes and Italian style green beans. Nothing on the menu is higher than \$11.95, and children's portions are available.

CARRABBA'S

3115 Kirby Drive, Houston, Texas, 77098 (713) 522-3131

There are numerous Carrabba's restaurants around Houston and around the country, but the Kirby location consistently is packed with Houston's See-and-Be-Seen crowd, who happily wait in the high-visibility bar until a table is free. Drinks are generous, servers and bartenders friendly, and the food is of the same high quality to be found at other Carrabba's locations. Crab cakes with sweet red pepper sauce are an excellent way to get your palate attuned to what is to follow; Mussels steamed in white wine, olive oil, garlic and herbs are fantastic; and the Stuffed Artichoke Sicilian Style is hard to beat.

Lentil and Sausage Soup and Minestrone are among the Insalate e Zuppe selections, as are Tomatoes and Roquefort, and Insalata Fiorucci, mixed field greens tossed with marinated artichoke hearts, roasted pepper, grilled eggplant, and a hazelnut goat cheese medallion. Pizzas Margherita, Rustica, and Al Quattro Formaggi (four cheeses) lead the list, or you can create your own pizza. Linguine with Clam Sauce or Linguine Pescatore (seafood) are among Hankamer's favorite pasta dishes, but save room for Veal, Lamb, or Pork Chops, or Quail wrapped in pancetta and fresh sage, served on polenta with Marsala sauce, from the Steaks and Chops section of the menu. Stuffed Shrimp Mandola, Veal Scaloppine, or Pollo Rosa Maria-chicken breast stuffed with prosciutto and fontina cheese-lead up the Specialties section. Dolci includes Tiramisu, Lemon Tart, Sogno di Cioccolata (a rich fudge brownie brushed with Kahlua), and Biscotti Cheesecake, an almond biscotti crust with a cream cheese and sour cream filling, served with strawberry sauce. And if it is your birthday, be sure to tell the waiter, and you will be serenaded in Italian by the entire team of servers!

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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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