



07/19/2007

## Pete Lorenzo's Cafe

By: Tom and Kate O'Neill, TIMEOFF

**This speakeasy-turned-steakhouse displays a burnished, atavistic charm and offers an array of familiar, generally well-prepared Italian dishes.**

Lorenzo's is a throwback to an earlier age: a speakeasy born during Prohibition that evolved into a restaurant during the Depression and World War II. Former Trenton cop and politico Pete Lorenzo opened this classic eatery in a former hotel opposite the Trenton train station after Prohibition ended. Since then, the same family has operated Lorenzo's, though it has passed through several generations and branches of the family tree. Neither the appearance nor the menu seems to have changed much since the time we first dined here — lunched, to be precise — 35 years ago.



### Pete Lorenzo's Café

66 S. Clinton Ave.

Trenton

(609) 695-6868

[www.petelorenzos.com](http://www.petelorenzos.com)

**Food:** Good to very good; steaks and chops: excellent

**Service:** Friendly but inconsistent and slow

**Prices:** Appetizers \$7-\$24 (mussels marinara for two to four people); salads \$8.50-\$22; pasta \$10.50-\$32; entrées \$14.95-\$75.95 (steak for two); sides and vegetables \$2.95-\$7.50; desserts \$4.25-\$6.25.

**Cuisine:** Steaks, chops, fresh seafood, Italian specialties

**Vegetarian Options:** Salads and pastas

**Ambience:** Steakhouse with speakeasy ancestry

**Hours:** Mon.-Fri. 11:30 a.m. to 11:00 p.m.; Sat. 5 p.m.-11 p.m. Sunday closed. Bar closes 1:30 a.m.

**Outdoor Dining:** Newly added fenced-in patio in rear courtyard

**Essentials:** Accepts most credit cards; private parking lot, valet usually available; full bar; wheelchair access through wine room from rear parking lot; reservations recommended.

Today Lorenzo's displays a burnished, atavistic charm, with straightforward food that reflects an era before lowering blood cholesterol levels became a national public health goal. Its menu is extensive and includes an array of familiar, generally well-prepared, Italian fare. And its seafood offerings can be fine. But the real reason to visit Lorenzo's is for outstanding steaks and chops, with a side dish of nostalgia. We started our trip into the past with a martini, served in a cruet, with the first half poured into a glass, while the cruet with the second half remained cold in a glass of ice cubes. Wines by the glass, a Sauvignon Blanc and a Pinot Grigio, were top notch, and nobody seemed to care much about the vintner or vintage.

Lorenzo's offers 30 or more hot and cold appetizers and salads. The Italian-style scungilli-calamari salad (\$11.50) served on a bed of fresh, leaf lettuce gained extra interest from the seafood's contrasting textures and piquant vinaigrette. Roasted peppers were paired with creamy, fresh mozzarella (\$8.50) in a cold appetizer accented by chopped onions and pesto. The menu offers a choice of calamari, shrimp or scallops stuffed with crabmeat and roasted peppers in a wine-roasted pignoli cream sauce (\$11.25). We opted for the scallops, and the serving of four in combination with the generous stuffing proved as rich and hearty as the ingredients suggest.

After the appetizers, the table setting, with its brown and buff table cloths and candle, was completed with bottles of ketchup, A-1 and Worcestershire sauce, another period touch. The somberly decorated room, with light brown wallpaper, dark wood and large black and white photographs of the restaurant in the old days, was lively with conversation and exchanges among guests.

Lorenzo's offers 20 pasta dishes (\$10.50-\$32). Those with hearty appetites might select a pasta dish before a main course, but we went straight to the main event. The inch-thick small sirloin (\$32.99) weighs in at 18-20 ounces. The menu promises the finest graded prime, dry-aged on the premises, "personally ordered by the owner and re-inspected at time of delivery." We ordered the steak char-grilled, medium rare, with steak fries and fresh green beans à la carte (\$5.25). The flavor and texture were excellent; though the meat was closer to medium-cooked by the time we sliced into it. The large portion of fresh, buttered beans was a delight.

The crabmeat in the linguini with red marinara sauce (\$21) was fresh, full-flavored and blended well with the sauce with its perfume of basil and oregano. The generous serving of pasta, advertised on the menu as "imported," was cooked to perfectly al dente.

The 10-12 ounce lamb chop (\$21) was at least an inch and a half thick and as big as

## Directions

a man's hand. Slightly blackened, it was rosy and medium rare inside — everything a lamb chop should be: tender, juicy, with the full flavor of the meat. But the lamb chop took some time to arrive. The server first appeared with a veal chop. We pointed out this error, and she apologized and said the lamb chop would be right out. (While we waited 15 minutes to enjoy our entrées together, the sirloin may have been self-cooking.) The outstanding onion rings, delivered with the veal chop, were consoling as the lamb chop was being cooked.

The mistake with the veal chop was only one of the service problems we encountered. A private room, full with a boisterous party, may have overtaxed the staff. No water was offered at the beginning of the meal, and later requests for refills went unanswered. Wine refills came, but slowly. One fork cleared away with the appetizers was not replaced, and the server was nowhere to be found to bring one to the table while the sirloin cooled. On the other hand, when a thunderstorm threatened to soak us as we departed, our server offered us her umbrella to get to the car.

The dessert tray (all items \$6.25) was uninspiring, and the samples appeared limp and dispirited. All the items except the cannoli are made elsewhere. Our tiramisu was light, not over-sweet, and subtly flavored with espresso. Peanut butter pie was a chocolate mousse with a layer of peanut butter in a soggy graham cracker crust.

While time seems to stand still at Lorenzo's, some changes are evident, including a comprehensive Web site. The restaurant now presents itself with an air of self-referential nostalgia, evident in the menu. And another change is in store: filling a real gap in Trenton, Lorenzo's now offers outdoor dining on a fenced, rear patio.