



# With its superb food, Lawrence's Genovese reclaims a notorious Italian name

By Charles Ferruzza

Published: May 1, 2008



Jaimie Warren

Details:  
Genovese Italian Restaurant

Skillet-roasted mussels **▣**\$7

Seafood fritto misto **▣**\$8

Grilled octopus **▣**\$8

Tuna tartare **▣**\$8

Leg of lamb with salsa verde **▣**

\$21 Short-rib ravioli special **▣**\$13

Dark-chocolate budini **▣**\$7

Now that a single gallon of gas costs nearly as much as a pack of cigarettes, a 12-ounce can of Red Bull or a box of Purina dog treats, friends of mine refuse to drive long distances to go out to eat. Even adventurous souls who didn't think twice about traveling as far north as Liberty or way out south to Olathe for a meal are singing a different tune: "Can't you think of a new restaurant closer to *my* house?"



Well, yes. But sometimes one has to venture outside one's comfort zone — or at least *I* do. I love driving to Lawrence for a little gastronomic getaway that includes eating several pastries at WheatFields Bakery & Café, then making a mad dash into Brits for a few Cadbury chocolate bars and a bag of Mint Humbugs. After a brisk walk up and down Massachusetts, I'm ready for some serious eating.

My new favorite joint on this lively street is **Genovese Italian Restaurant**, a 10-month-old bistro owned by Subarna Bhattachan and Alejandro Lule — proprietors of Lawrence's popular La Parilla and Zen Zero dining spots — and Mexican-born chef Armando Paniagua. It's located in the three-story building that for more than two decades was home to the Mass Street Deli. I mention the three floors because, on one of my visits, I had to haul my weary ass up two long flights of stairs to sit in the lovely, airy third-story space that has two sets of French doors opening onto a small balcony with two small tables. On that night, my friend Carol Ann and I opted to dine at a table near the doors but not on the balcony. Don't get me wrong — I'm all for *al fresco* dining on a

balmy spring night. But dainty, narrow balconies have given me the whim-whams since I saw *Vertigo*. (Genovese has a fenced-off sidewalk patio, too, but it was full that night.)

Carol Ann and I are former servers, so we cringed at the idea of having to run up and down all those stairs to pick up and carry plates from the first-floor kitchen. As unbelievable as it sounds, there's no elevator or dumbwaiter to the upper floors.

"I don't mind," our cheery server Carlos said as he set a plate of soft focaccia in front of us, and then a tiny little dish of olives, green beans and chopped carrots marinated in olive oil, anise and rosemary. "It's good exercise, as long as you wear the right shoes."

Well, he had the right attitude as well as the right shoes. I experienced really exceptional service on both of my visits to Genovese, so running up and down stairs must not intimidate potential servers.

The restaurant's name must not be a problem, either. Until recently, when I heard the word *Genovese*, I thought of only two things: the infamous mob family of New York City and the still-notorious Kitty Genovese case of 1964, when an entire Queens neighborhood heard the murder victim screaming for help — and did nothing.

But like Bhattachan and Lule's restaurant Zen Zero (*zenzero* is the Italian word for ginger), the newer venue is named for an herb: *Ocimum basilicum Genovese*, or sweet Genovese basil. I'm told it's the best basil for making pesto.

"I had never heard of the Genovese crime family," Bhattachan told me later, "until our lawyers did a Google search on the name and all these references popped up."

Those references didn't inspire chef Paniagua to add "Lucky Luciano" lamb or "Fat Tony" Salerno spaghetti to the menu — and he didn't need to, because his mix of traditional and inventive Italian fare is interesting on its own. And the prices are modest enough that it's possible to sample quite a few things without breaking the *banca*. Carol Ann, for example, wanted to try the grilled octopus as a starter, while I was eager to taste the crispy zucchini chips — so we ordered both. I'm not typically a fan of grilled octopus because it's so frequently rubbery and tough. But at Genovese, the warm, bite-sized bits are tender, succulent and tossed with spicy arugula, shaved fennel, soft white beans and a splash of lemon juice. Carol Ann raved about them. Even better were the feather-light zucchini crisps, made from paper-thin slices of zucchini dusted with flour and salt and flash fried. Not a bit greasy and lighter than air. "You don't feel a bit guilty eating them," Carol Ann said. I know I didn't.

That night's pasta special, on the other hand, sounded none too light: ravioli stuffed with braised short-rib meat, sprinkled with sliced shiitakes and served in a soothing broth. I loved the dish, even though the ravioli was a little on the doughy side. Carol Ann's juicy and tender leg of lamb was slathered in a salsa verde — crushed capers, parsley and olive oil with only a hint of tartness. "It's so fantastic, I can't stop eating," she said, but she stopped herself after finishing half the dish (which Carlos boxed for her to take home) so she could have dessert. Then, she couldn't decide among the espresso gelato or the spring peach crême brûlée or the dark-chocolate budini.

"What is a budini?" she asked Carlos.

"It's very good," he said, smiling.

"I'll have it," she said.

In Italy, *budino* is a thick, cooked pudding made with eggs, heavy cream and starch. I've tasted different variations over the years, some made like a molten chocolate cake, others as frothy as a mousse. Genovese delivers it warm, swirled in a cup like old-fashioned chocolate pudding but with a firmer, pastrylike component in the center. Carol Ann was delighted, though two bites were enough for me.

And dessert was out of the question on my second visit to Genovese because I'd already eaten something rich and decadent at WheatFields. Still, I was ravenous for something savory.

Addison and Bob were immediately charmed by the place and by a brilliant young waiter — a future international business tycoon — who gave us his entire life story between courses. Shellfish-loving Bob was wowed by the presentation of pan-roasted mussels, served on a sizzling skillet in a light lemon butter ("They have a wonderful smoky flavor," he told us), and Addison devoured most of the delicately battered shrimp and calamari on the plate of seafood *fritto misto*. We also shared a first-rate Margherita pizza, enjoying the thin, crackly crust.

Addison made a meal out of the supple tuna tartare, while I savored each bite of a fiery puttanesca pasta.

Addison had been hesitant about driving all the way to Lawrence to eat in a casual Italian restaurant. "We've got so many great places in Kansas City, baby," he whined. "Can't we go to Lidia's instead?" But all the way home, he couldn't stop talking about how much he liked Genovese. His only complaint was that I couldn't find a parking place near the restaurant, and we had to walk a few blocks.

I had no sympathy. After all, that's what Massachusetts Street is all about.

[Click here](#) to write a letter to the editor.