



BELLINI'S

Review from: 04.25.07

By: **Brian Ries**

I'm not sure that La Fogata fits in Gulfport. The restaurant is decidedly slicker than the linen-shirt-and-leather-flip-flop crowd in evidence every time I visit this seaside neighborhood. That's what I wear, too, but walking into the shocking darkness and frigidly conditioned air of Fogata, I immediately feel out of place. And a little chilly.

Not for long, though. The crew is a gregarious bunch, which, combined with the manicured and styled look of the place, starts to give me that generically hospitable feeling that I always associate with, well, chain joints. Which La Fogata will be, given the druthers of co-owner Jeffrey Blanding, who hits our table within seconds with an explanation of the concept.

Never eaten at a churrascaria? This style of dining, with roots in Brazil, is a wet dream for carnivorous mass consumers, an unending stream of skewered and charred flesh that requires none of the hunting and gathering necessary at most all-you-can-eat spots, all for \$45 per person. At most, a subtle nod of the head is all that's required to beckon Fogata's knife-wielding meat-mavens to slice a hunk of seasoned protein onto your plate. There is even a handy button painted green on one side, red on the other. Leave it on green for a visit from the nearest wandering meat. Flip to red for a break.

All of the meat is grilled "rodizio" style, over a hardwood mesquite fire, with just a coating of rock salt for seasoning. It works exceptionally well under the watchful eye of La Fogata's chef. Medallion of mahi? Don't mind if I do, especially when the fish is this moist and cooked just right, with the salty crust typical of churrascaria. Bacon-wrapped turkey? Sure, since the pork keeps it moist and gives this often bland poultry a dose of rich smoke. The sausages are adequate, and there are no chicken hearts or lamb tonight, but I'm not complaining. At Fogata -- like all churrascarias -- the beef's the thing.

That said, you should stay away from the filet mignon. For some reason, even the one cuddled in a piece of fatty bacon lacks character, and the plain version is an absolute waste of valuable stomach space. Filet is a recent addition to the churrascaria repertoire, designed to dazzle American consumers. Unsurprisingly, traditional is better, even at a proto-chain like Fogata.

The first item to truly impress is a beautifully seared slab of flank steak, sliced on the bias into thin strips by our server. It's salty, with a bit of chew and a heaping mound of flavor. Then comes sirloin that may be the best piece of beef I've put in my mouth this year. When the picanha hits the table I revise my opinion. This is the best beef I've had in years.

Picanha is the traditional cut of gaucho gourmards, known in this country as "rump cover," if you can find it. The pieces of picanha are folded into half moons on the metal spit, with a uniform layer of crackling, luscious fat lining the outside. The rosy red slice is almost as tender as those filets, and it tastes like the beef from my childhood, before cattle started growing up on industrial feedlots. By the end of the night, I will gesture the servers over for seconds, thirds and fourths.

For those who desire clear intestinal tracts, there is more than meat. An innocuous salad bar off to the side of Fogata has a wide variety of fixin's, antipasta and pasta, most of which serve as a tasty enough diversion between meat courses. It's indicative of Fogata's quality that almost everything coming from this "salad bar" is the equal of actual served food at most restaurants. There is a hint of Asian-fusion in many of the dishes -- as well as the spectacular and blindingly spicy Thai steak sauce that you should use with caution -- thanks to an executive chef of Thai descent.

One of the reasons I like Fogata so much -- and one of the reasons why it seems so out of place in Gulfport -- has to be Bellini's, Fogata's hip bar. It's almost a separate entity, with an entirely different feel. While Fogata's decor strikes a classic but innocuous chain pose that would work almost anywhere, Bellini's is actually stylish and smart, with a posh European vibe.

There's a fire and water theme -- just glance at the paintings, even the landscape at the back -- but that's just a backdrop for the modern red and white sitting area lined with laminate cubes, stiff cushions and glass in front of textured walls cut by slashes of a geometric lighting effect. Like I said, it's cool.

So are the tapas served in the bar. There are the Spanish classics -- albondigas, potatoes and aioli, anchovies -- as well as a wide selection of small meat dishes that take advantage of Fogata's carnivorous inclinations. Fried bacon-wrapped figs? Best bar food ever.

Perhaps as a concession to the neighborhood, there is an outdoor area that's cozy enough, but decidedly under-dressed compared to the interior. Still, Bellini's is open much longer hours than Fogata, so maybe that will generate some local business.

In the end, though, local business is just icing to Fogata's owners. Churrascaria-style dining is becoming immensely popular in the United States (with two chains opening up in the Bay area in the past year) and Fogata definitely has something a little different to offer. It's cozier and a little more subdued than the massive temples to Brazilian beef that are more common, and the salad bar is decidedly more upscale.

When the expansion begins, Fogata's style is going to find more traction in well-heeled suburbs than some of the more crass versions of churrascaria dining. First Gulfport, then the world!

Brian Ries is a former restaurant general manager with an advanced diploma from the Court of Master Sommeliers. Creative Loafing food critics dine anonymously, and the paper pays for the meals. Restaurants chosen for review are not related to advertising.