

FOOD

by Loyd McIntosh



On the "Deep Fried Korean Thanksgiving" episode of *Gilmore Girls* - one of my wife's favorite shows - Sookie's husband sets about destroying her favorite day of the year by deep-frying the turkey in the front yard for all the world to see. By the end of the day, the hosts and their guests had become sufficiently soused that they started deep-frying all sorts of items - hats, gloves, shoes, etc. What the writers of that episode didn't realize, I'm quite sure, is that a lot of folks on this side of the Mason Dixon line were watching and thinking, 'That actually sounds pretty good.'

If it can be baked, broiled, sautéed or grilled and be tasty, chances are it can be deep-fried in boiling hot oil and be even better. Southerners have known this for generations, and despite the warnings about such fare causing everything from diabetes and heart disease to halitosis and dandruff, fried foods are often good for the soul. For proof of this theory, you're well-advised to check out **Tangredi's Italian Kitchen**, a quaint Vestavia Italian eatery that serves up great deep-fried calzones. That's right, *deep-fried calzones*.

Michael and Maria Tangredi opened their restaurant in April in a space located on the ground floor of the Vestavia Motor Lodge, a somewhat run-down motel on Highway 31 in the heart of Vestavia Hills. Despite the building's weathered façade and the less-than-hospitable nature of the motel's owner - he tried to run me off while I was shooting photos for this article - Tangredi's is a unique treat in a town with a number of great Italian restaurants. "The home of the deep fried calzone," Tangredi's has turned this somewhat forgotten space on the Montgomery Highway into a fun, quirky and comfortable Italian bistro with colorful tables and booths, faux brick walls, and hand stenciled phrases like "Send ya taste buds to Italy" hand-painted alongside menu items on the restaurant's walls. The smooth jazz that emanates from the restaurant's stereo system adds to the rustic charm of the space, which in years past has been everything from a Korean buffet to a Mexican restaurant.



The menu at Tangredi's runs the gamut from pastas and hand made pizzas, to veal piccata and chicken franchise. But the deep-fried calzone is the signature item, a plus-sized work of art fried in peanut oil and served with a dish of Tangredi's homemade marinara sauce. It's big, hot, cheesy and enough to send any Atkins dieter into a tizzy.

"When you come to an Italian restaurant that's usually not something you're concerned about in the first place," Maria Tangredi says. "But, it's actually not that bad for you."

The dish really represents the cuisine of Birmingham, the quintessential southern town with a healthy and vibrant Italian community. So flawlessly does the deep fried calzone fit into the city's culinary landscape, you'd swear that it was born here. However, Michael Tangredi says the idea actually has its roots in the Northeast where the restaurateur grew up sampling the fare at pizzerias and Italian joints up and down the Hudson River line.

"Years ago a few old Italian restaurants throughout Brooklyn and New Jersey used to do it, but they kind of got away from it over the years," Michael says. "It's something I remembered from when I was a kid. We would go to these little Italian places and eat these fried calzones. I kept in mind all these years and we tried it out a couple of times and it went over really well."

Tangredi starts out with a flat circle of pizza dough and spreads a generous amount of ricotta cheese. He then adds your choice of toppings (I went with pepperoni, pineapple and mushrooms) and then finishes it off with three more cheeses: mozzarella, pecorino and Romano.



"We'll put any topping you want in them," Michael says. "We'll even do specialties sometimes like seafood. We've done crawfish tails and shrimp marinara calzones from time to time."

The calzone is then dropped in the deep fryer and cooked at 350 degrees for 12 to 15 minutes. Once the calzone has fried up golden brown, Tangredi carefully plates the creation on a plate with a steak knife and a bowl of the marinara sauce that he begins working on each morning at 5:30.

The end result is a golden brown calzone the size of a football with an aroma that alone is enough to draw you back into Tangredi's Italian Kitchen. The shell is crisp and tender and the filling is piping hot with oodles of cheese and toppings spilling out from the inside. Dip a forkful into the chunky marinara bursting with tomatoes and fresh herbs and you have one of the city's best new combinations of flavors.

Contrary to what you might believe, the fried calzone isn't greasy at all. The fillings stay away from the hot oil thanks to the capable hands of Michael Tangredi, who personally prepares almost all of the 30 to 40 fried calzones currently being ordered per day. He seals each calzone so tight that not a drop gets inside, which would be a disaster of enormous gastronomic proportions.

"It's got to be sealed really well," he says. "If you throw it in the oil and it's not sealed well you have to start all over. If the oil gets inside of it, it's ruined. They have to be done right. There's a little trick to it. It's not all just throwing it in the fryer and walking away."

Tangredi's deep-fried calzones are generously proportioned, leaving you plenty for lunch and dinner - that is, if you can make yourself stop before you've cleaned your plate.

Tangredi's Italian Kitchen is located at 1459 Montgomery Highway in Vestavia Hills. You can call the restaurant at 823-8800.