

# The View review

*Rosemary Staal  
samples a taste of Italy*



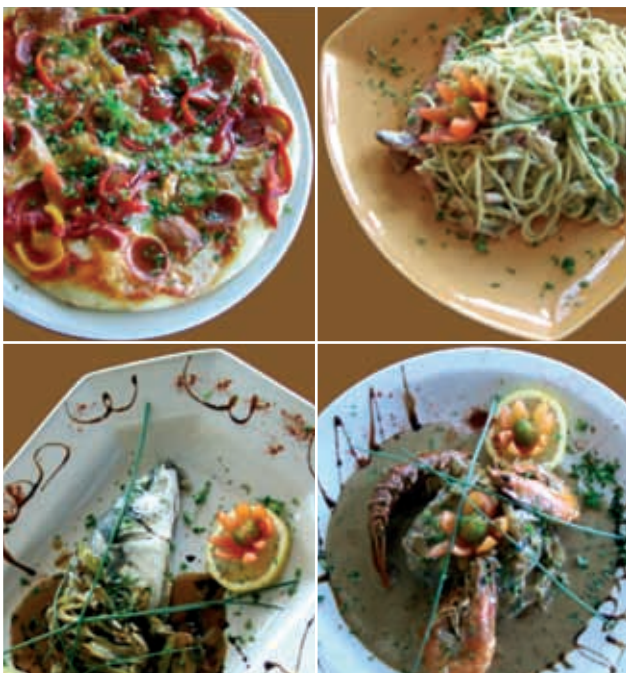
La Margherita • 1Town Quay • Southampton • 02380 333390 • [www.lamargherita.co.uk](http://www.lamargherita.co.uk)

I have never been anywhere quite like La Margherita. ‘That place really rocks,’ a friend remarked when I told her where D and I were going for the evening. Duly warned, we are not surprised to see bouncers in the entrance and a huge bar area already filling up with a young and lively crowd intent on a great night out.

Fortunately, for those neither young nor very lively, the spacious restaurant is a few steps down from the smoky bar area so we can get on with the enjoyable business of dining in relative peace.

The main dining area is in a spectacular conservatory-style extension jutting out into Southampton Water. It makes for spellbinding views, especially as darkness falls and the lights right round to Fawley and Hythe sparkle like jewels stitched on to the black velvet of the water around the city’s margins.

No wonder people with romance on their minds come here. Maybe if you can’t make it to Venice, this is the next best place for proposing while the tide rises under a full moon. Stars of stage, screen and TV come, too, as well as ordinary folk like us. We obviously share a desire for our food to come with a side serving of pizzazz.



The whole La Margherita experience puts me in mind of an absorbing theatrical performance. There is drama outside – the high-speed Isle of Wight ferry docks yards away and busy sailors animate the set as they bustle about in their boats. Inside, it’s more of an extemporised musical, as the staff make their entrances and exits, always smiling, delivering dishes with a dramatic flourish and hamming it up delightfully as they parade in from the kitchen, ringing a ship’s bell, to deliver a candle-topped birthday cake to a blushing diner.

It’s all very relaxed and a lot of fun and we soon see where the staff get their charm from when we meet Nikos Raftopoulos, or Niko, as he is known, who runs the whole La Margherita venue. Not an Italian, but a Greek, although his grandmother is Sicilian and he thinks that that, and the fact he is a trained chef who adores Italian food, are credentials enough.

I am prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt and see if his avowed passion for great Italian cooking does the trick in the kitchen. D and I are unashamed Italian food snobs, preferring to save our desire for the real thing until we are actually in Italy rather than risk dumbed-down anglicised versions. As we know our way round Italian food better than any other cuisine, Niko was in for quite a test.

Reader, he passed. In fact he, his entire staff, the restaurant, the bar, the loos, everything about La Margherita, passed with flying colours and we had a night to remember in a quite unique setting.

We dined handsomely on dishes that would find favour among even the most demanding of Italians, who tend not to be known for their adventurous palates. This food, we agreed, would please Mamma as much as it did us.

Three courses: antipasto of buffalo mozzarella, tomato, artichoke and basil for me, carpaccio for him (‘the best I’ve ever tasted’ D said), followed by pasta, and then sea bream for him (‘perfectly cooked, moist and surprisingly tasty’) and yellowfin tuna for me (sorry, too busy swooning to comment).

It simply doesn’t matter that Niko isn’t Italian, nor that the cooks and the rest of the staff are French, Spanish, Moroccan, Chinese, Latvian – and Italian.

This is definitely a place that flies an international flag, and with a flourish.

Our 3-course dinner, excluding wine: £60. ▼