

## Good pub fare with an emphasis on friendly service

December 20, 2009

### **Tavern in the Square**

189 Washington St., Salem

978-740-2337

taverninthesquare.com

Open Monday through Friday, 11:30 a.m. to 1 a.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 10:30 a.m. to 1 a.m.; late night menu Thursday through Saturday, 11 p.m. to midnight

Major credit cards accepted

Accessible to the handicapped

Reservations accepted before 6 p.m. for parties of eight or more Thursday through Saturday

Bar favorites like nachos, wings, and burgers seem like standard fare for a restaurant featuring booths with private televisions, as if the larger ones lining the wall overhead aren't enough. In the case of Tavern in the Square in Salem, however, you may miss out if you limit yourself to old favorites.

Open for just over six months, the restaurant has locations of the same name in Cambridge's Central and Porter squares. While sports are taken seriously at all three self-billed neighborhood restaurants and bars, so is customer service.

According to Jesse Cody, assistant general manager in Salem, a "10/5 rule" is followed - meaning that the staff smiles at diners standing 10 feet away, while greeting those within 5 feet and ensuring their needs are being met. A "server buddy" philosophy encourages wait staff to work as a team to deliver food, refill drinks, and clear empty plates.

"We focus on making sure our guests are happy," said Cody, emphasizing that diners are referred to as "guests" rather than "customers."

"We want them to feel like they're coming into a homey place," he added. "We give them the attention they deserve and build from there."

This philosophy was readily apparent when our party of three visited on a recent Friday night. We walked past the lively bar to the hostess station, where we were greeted warmly and led to the surprisingly spacious dining room. Our knowledgeable waitress answered all of our questions and was quick to put a diner at ease when he admitted to not liking a drink.

"If you don't tell me," she said, taking the drink away for a replacement, "I can't make it perfect."

We had no such concerns with the appetizers.

The first taste of the maple sweet fries (\$7), a heaping amount of crispy sweet potato fries drizzled with Dijon maple sauce and served in a hot skillet, led one of our diners to exclaim, "Why hasn't someone done this sooner?" While the dish perfectly suited his sweet tooth, a diner with a lesser one might not be as enthusiastic.

The fried pickles (\$7) were crispy, kosher dill spears with a light breading. Spices in both the batter and accompanying mustard bistro sauce provided just the right amount of kick.

The chicken Thai lettuce wraps (\$11) consisted of tender chunks of chicken sautéed in a spicy sauce with water chestnuts, shredded carrots, and scallions served over rice noodles that delivered an unexpectedly pleasing crunch. We happily took turns peeling off layers of cool iceberg lettuce, onto which we spooned the warm mixture along with dollops of sweet chili and Thai peanut sauce.

Our table's fan-favorite entrée was the homestyle meatloaf (\$15) featuring two thick slabs of well-seasoned ground sirloin and cheddar cheese. The steak-like grill marks and sweet, flavorful barbecue sauce elevated this comfort food to an entrée worthy of a special occasion. For the two side items, the diner selected sautéed broccoli that was firm with a hint of garlic, and crispy tater-tots drizzled with white truffle oil and dusted with Parmesan cheese.

The diner who ordered the pan-seared, pistachio-encrusted tuna (\$18) enjoyed the dish, though he wished he had followed the waitress's recommendation to order it medium-rare. While still delicious when cooked medium, he said its steak-like consistency made it easy to forget he was eating fish. The tuna was topped with sweet pineapple curry sauce and served over asparagus and garlic mashed potatoes that were surprisingly bland, given the creativity of the other dishes.

The baked chicken tarragon (\$15) featured two tender chicken breasts coated in light tarragon and Dijon breading and topped with leeks and not enough sautéed mushrooms. While the chicken was moist and the breading well seasoned, sauce would have been welcome - even to add flavor to the same garlic mashed potatoes and sweet corn.

The generous desserts were consistent with the substantial entrée portions. At first glance, the two fried Snickers (\$7) drizzled with chocolate sauce looked like cannoli. Although it took some work to cut through the tough exterior, the gush of warm chocolate, nougat, peanuts, and caramel cooled by two giant scoops of vanilla ice cream made the effort worthwhile.

The flaky, shortbread crust of the caramel apple pie (\$7, plus \$1 a la mode) was stuffed with spiced, sliced apples and decadently creamy custard. Although it is normally served at room temperature, our agreeable waitress accommodated our diner's request for it to be warmed.

Tavern in the Square offers an a la carte breakfast menu on Saturdays and an all-you-can-eat brunch buffet on Sundays. A disc jockey provides entertainment to late-night crowds Thursdays through Saturdays.

CINDY CANTRELL