



April 16, 2009

Consistency is key to popularity of Houlihan's, regular diners say

Eatery's service, favorite foods "just as good as it's always been."

*Katie Tonarely
for the News-Leader*

When Shari Banning told Dine on Our Dime about her favorite dishes at Houlihan's on North Glenstone Avenue, she didn't mince words. She knew exactly what she wanted us to try, and we happily obliged.

Shari's take

Though Houlihan's is new to Springfield, Shari says she and her husband frequented its Philadelphia location when she lived in a nearby suburb.

However, when they moved to Springfield, they weren't able to indulge in their favorites anymore.

After living in Springfield eight years, Shari was ecstatic when a Houlihan's opened. Shari's favorites -- the stuffed chicken breast and Tuscan salad -- were still around, and "just as good as it's always been," she says.

Also, the service at Houlihan's never disappoints, Shari says.

"People are always so friendly and attentive to you," she says.

On the night we visited, Shari decided to stick with her favorites.

The Tuscan salad is layered with goat cheese, tomatoes, white beans, balsamic field greens and focaccia crisps molded into a perfect circle.

"This is a really interesting salad," she says. "It's a nice departure from standard tossed salad."

For Shari, it's the combination of goat cheese and white beans that make the Tuscan salad a Houlihan's must-have.

The entrees arrived quickly, which was good, because Shari says she loves her food "very, very hot," and Houlihan's food comes out "piping hot."

Houlihan's chicken breast is breaded, stuffed with a garlic-herb cream cheese and baked until golden brown and the cheese is melted, making the dish juicy on the outside and warm and gooey on the inside.

"It's just so moist on the inside and crunchy on the outside," Shari says .

The chicken breast came with mashed potatoes and vegetables . On our visit, the mashed potatoes weren't as hot as Shari prefers, but she says she likes that they have the peel in them: "I'm sure they're real potatoes," she says.

Houlihan's offers mini-desserts to give guests a few tastes of something sweet without the guilt. We wanted a bit of variety, so we chose the Three's Company (any three minis) with Bourbon pecan pie, Snickers Crunch ice cream dome and crème brulee.

Shari says the pecan pie was delicious and she also enjoyed the crème brulee.

"That's to die for," she says of the vanilla bean custard dessert.

Katie's turn

Houlihan's sleek interior and contemporary furnishings give it a classy yet casual feel. The menu is extensive, ranging from Chipotle smoked chicken enchiladas to filet mignon. I was glad Shari was doing the choosing .

I was surprised by the Tuscan salad. I expected a traditional lettuce salad, but this proved to be anything but traditional: shaped in a circle with lettuce wrapped around the sides, holding everything in.

The salad's fresh taste made me feel healthier just from eating it. The taste of white beans and goat cheese was different from anything I've tried before; the foccacia crisps had a crispy flavor that tasted better than any breadstick or potato chip .

The menu made the stuffed chicken breast sound out of this world, and the taste definitely matched the description. I loved the cream cheese filling, which was so packed with flavor, I didn't have a problem feeling satisfied.

Though my body kept telling me to stop, I couldn't help but eat my entire dish. It was just too good.

I also like the idea of the mini- desserts. Often -- well, usually -- I'm so stuffed after an amazing meal that I can't do dessert; however, that sweet tooth still creeps in. Houlihan's minis were the perfect solution. I enjoyed the crème brulee mini the most; the caramelized sugar complemented the creamy, sweet pudding texture.

The dish, the restaurant

According to Houlihan's general manager Charity Brooks, the north side restaurant opened in August 2008. She says Doubletree Hotel owner Tim O'Reilly has always been a huge Houlihan's fan and wanted to bring his favorite to Springfield. The original Houlihan's opened in 1972 in Kansas City.

Charity says that diners have so taken to Houlihan's guest-oriented atmosphere, that a south side location is in the works for early 2010.

C customers appreciate the trendy, eclectic mood and the variety of fresh offerings.

"We're a 95 percent made -from-scratch kitchen," she says. Everything is made in-house except for the honey mustard and horseradish, she says.

To create that unique mold for the Tuscan salad, Charity says the cooks start with metal rings. The spring mix on the bottom helps form the salad circle and keeps the other ingredients together.

The stuffed chicken breasts are stuffed with herbed cream cheese, then are breaded with seasoned fry flour and panko bread crumbs. Then, they're baked in the oven until brown.

Charity says Houlihan's mini desserts have been a hit with customers. Customers are usually stuffed at the end of their meal, so the mini option let's them still enjoy a dessert without feeling overloaded.

"They're big enough to get a taste, but not big enough to have waste," she says.

She says the secret to creating unbelievable mini desserts is using pure ingredients. Houlihan's prep cook Ra-keish Roland makes the best pecan pie ever, she says.

Even the pastry crust is made in-house.

Shari and I left Houlihan's stuffed and happy. I can't wait to have the stuffed chicken breast again, and I know I'll just have to try more of those mini- desserts , too.

Additional Facts

Chew on this

Address: 2431 N. Glenstone Ave.

Phone: 862-7777

Cuisine: Eclectic American

Hours: 11 a.m.-11 p.m. Sunday-Thursday, 11 a.m.-midnight Friday, Saturday

Price range: \$3.95-\$24.95

Accepts: Cash, credit and debit cards

Reservations Accepted for parties of eight or more or on holidays

Services: Carry-out, Jazz Night on the last Friday of the month, private dining room

Parking: Private lot

Seating capacity: 220

Family friendly: Yes

Wheelchair accessible: Yes

Alcohol: Full bar

Smoking: No
