



Restaurant review: Houlihan's exceled in changing writer's mind

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Can a company once famous for a chain of corporate restaurants reinvent itself as a generator of places where people more serious about food would want to eat? That's the protracted culinary question I investigated after a friend suggested I write about the new Houlihan's. I mean, after I stopped laughing.

See, my dim recollections of Houlihan's were of a frozen-and-nuked and/or grease-gurgled sort of undistinguished cuisine. But I gotta give the made-over operation due credit, because dining at the scratch-cooking, month-old Upper Arlington branch is closer to eating at Third and Hollywood than it is to crap-loading your maw at "TGI McFunsters."



Photos by Tim Johnson

It all starts with the ambiance, and Houlihan's nailed it. What they nailed is a welcoming, comfy and casual look enhanced by upscale, undeniably handsome contemporary touches. Underneath a rafted ceiling and flattering low lighting, the main dining room has an open kitchen plus shiny green fabric-backed banquettes and curvy booths. Wooden tables get padded and appealing chairs. Separating this area from the popular bar — which is underlit and sports a sorta brick-red basket pattern — is a large glass-cased fireplace. There's also outdoor seating that looks about as inviting as a patio stuck in a mall parking lot probably could.

Houlihan's

3150 Tremont Rd.,
Upper Arlington

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houlihans.com

Plenty of thought likewise went into the menu, starting with a chef's name at the top and continuing through buzzwords like "sourced," "organic" and the clunkier "flexitarian." While the wine offerings would be great only for a corner carryout and the silly-tinis showcase relics from a cosmo-sipping era, the small beer list offers a few rarified selections from Rockmill Brewery, Estrella Damm and Hoppin' Frog Brewery.

Neither I nor Houlihan's sank when I dove into the menu's deep end with Seared Georges Bank Scallops (the "small" is \$14). Though one of the four golden-browned sweet shellfish was split in half, the attractive dish was a success with its accomplished, creamy yet light and lemony risotto, basil oil and a crowning arugula salad lively with fresh lemon juice.

The hulking, bell pepper-flecked Creekstone Farms Meatloaf (\$14.25, prepared with partially grass-fed black angus) gets juiced with a potent, wine- and mushroom-enhanced gravy. Like the scallop entree, everything on the plate — including ridiculously delicious smashed potatoes and crispy, not greasy onion straws — made sense and ate pretty great. For another \$2.75, entrees and sandwiches can be partnered with a soup (like Rustic Tomato — a big, rich, basil-accented and cheese-fritter-garnished huge improvement over that schooldays favorite) or salad (e.g. a timbale-stacked and flavor-packed Tuscan White Bean).

Happy hour (5-7 p.m. Monday-Friday) allows noshers — I spotted lots of, uh, "early birders" — to sample "shareable" snacks for a couple bucks off. On this roster are (note prices provided are not discounted): junk-tastic Chipotle Chicken Nachos (\$10) — scorched parchment paper held an enormous portion of fresh-tasting chips outfitted with above-average versions of every bell and whistle; recommended Disco Fries (\$8) — a poutine-like boatload of un-greasy, broiler-blistered, real-deal fries drenched in that mushroom and wine gravy and dressed with unctuous pot roast lumps and melted cheese; good, mix-and-matchable Sliders on brioche-like buns ("3 pak"/\$11) — try the char-grilled Creekstone Black Angus Burger, the smoky pulled pork and the 'shroomy, herby and black bean-y veggie; fresh and simple Organic Steamed Pot Stickers (\$9); and Lettuce Wraps (\$10) — chopped chicken in a messy and sweet Thai chili sauce.

I'll answer my opening question now: This new, nice-priced and mind-changing Houlihan's deserves some suburban dollars.

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