

Dining review: Houlihan's in Fort Worth

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The Alliance Corridor is one of the fastest-growing parts of Tarrant County, and yet as recently as five years ago the [restaurant](#) options were, to put it charitably, limited — especially for the booming neighborhoods north of the U.S. 287-I-35W split.

With ever-expanding Alliance Town Center, that has changed. At and near the sprawling shopping complex between the North Tarrant Parkway and Heritage Trace Parkway exits off I-35, there's now a variety of full-service and fast-casual chains, as well as a couple of indies.

The latest full-service chain to open a restaurant there, Missouri-based Houlihan's, sits next to a Mi Cocina, behind a BJ's Brewhouse and across the parking lot from an Olive Garden. This proximity comes in handy: Faced with a 45-minute wait one Saturday night at Houlihan's, our party of two simply walked next door to Mi Cocina, where the wait was half as long.

Even around 7 p.m. on the following Tuesday, we faced a 20-minute wait, and customers who came in after us were given longer wait times (Tuesday is half-price wine night, so that was a factor). Apparently, this location — which opened in mid-October — is doing something right. Judging from our visits, that something includes friendly service and food that's often a notch or two above what we've come to expect from chain [restaurants](#). There have been some glitches, however.

The large, just-short-of-overwhelming [dinner](#) menu is divided into "small plates" and "not small plates." Each side includes apps, and we went with the small-plate jumbo stuffed 'shrooms (\$4.75 for three; the not-small-plate portion is \$9.75 for seven). Although it's not noted on the menu that these are breaded and fried, we liked 'em that way: The coating added some crispy texture to a potentially slippery dish, and kept the goat cheese-stuffed baby portobellos from sliding into a mess. The cheese could have been a little more pungent, as could the accompanying creamy horseradish sauce, but overall, this was a good start, and the "small" serving was plenty for both of us.



[View photos](#)

Houlihan's
9355 Rain Lily Trail (in Alliance Town Center)
817-750-2190;
www.houlihans.com
Hours: 11 a.m.-10 p.m.
Sunday-Thursday (bar open till 11 p.m.); 11 a.m.-midnight Friday and Saturday (bar open till 1 a.m.)

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At our server's recommendation, I went with the Creekstone Farms meatloaf (\$14.25) for my entree. Made with black Angus beef, the large, two-slice serving of meatloaf comes with a red wine mushroom sauce and sits atop mashed potatoes and beneath a forest of onion straws. The meatloaf was rich and flavorful, if not as fork-tender as some people might like, but the winners here were the supremely buttery, whipped-with-flecks-of-skin potatoes and the soft but crunchy, not-overpowering onion straws. The red-wine sauce was all but unnoticeable among the stronger flavors.

My wife went with the small-plate wild mushroom and arugula flatbread (\$8.25), a mix of portobello, shiitake and oyster mushrooms with roasted garlic white sauce, truffle vinaigrette and a blend of cheeses. The sauces weren't all that strong, but the cheese blend had a good, sharp punch and the crust was a perfect level of crispy.

But this is where the glitches start to come in, because this entree wasn't her first choice; that would have been the veggie burger. The restaurant was out of them during our dinner visit (we were told that a Keller-based vegetarian club had ordered 45 that afternoon), a fact that should have been mentioned up front, and certainly should have been mentioned after my wife told our otherwise excellent server that she's a vegetarian.

My wife's luck continued with dessert, although in this case, the restaurant had just run out of the lemon-berry trifle she ordered. Fortunately, the s'mores fondue crock (\$5.25) -- strips of glazed graham crackers that you dip into a marshmallow-chocolate sauce concoction (dramatically presented by a server who unwraps the crock to reveal the roasted marshmallow covering sitting on top) -- was big enough for two. And we didn't leave any of it behind.

We returned a couple of days later for lunch -- or, as Houlihan's refers to it, the Nooner. During the 11 a.m.-2 p.m. Nooner, you get your food in 15 minutes or its free (restrictions apply). We really weren't rushed and were actually a little bothered by the timer on the table -- except that the kitchen messed up my order, and a server and the manager on duty separately came out to tell us that the entire meal was on the house because they didn't make the 15-minute deadline (this happened to only one other party, the manager told us).

But at least my wife got to have the veggie burger (\$8.95, plus an extra dollar because she subbed edamame for fries). And she pronounced the burger -- a not-mushy black bean/chickpea patty topped with cheddar -- one of the best she's ever had. No wonder that Keller club ordered 45 of 'em. My Southwest grilled chicken wrap (\$9.75) was also good, but I often found individual ingredients such as spicy pecans and bacon to be even better when separated from the gang inside the sandwich.

Despite the glitches, we feel good about the place -- the menu has a lot to offer, and the staff's friendliness and enthusiasm smoothed over a lot of the bumps. The room is warm, the indie-rock/dance-music soundtrack (the menu even selects songs to "pair" with certain dishes) intriguing but played at a moderate level. There's a lot to explore here, and we like what we've found, so we'll be back.