



Michigan

Dining Out restaurant review: Houlihan's at Breton Village

By [George Aquino](#) July 30, 2012

GRAND RAPIDS, MI --

National chain restaurants such as TGI Friday's, Applebee's and even the high-end Ruth's Chris Steak House get a bad rap among the food snobs for simply being "chains." Sure, there are chain restaurants that I wouldn't set my foot in, but then again, there are abominable local joints out there too.

I am all for supporting "local," but let's not be naïve in thinking that national chain restaurants are all owned by some distant corporate office in Florida. It's quite probable that the owner of the franchise restaurant in Grand Rapids is your son's baseball coach or the usher at your church.



[Enlarge](#)

George Aquino

Porch at Houlihan's at Breton Village.

[Houlihan's at Breton Village Dining Out review 2012 gallery \(10 photos\)](#)



Did you know that a bachelor perfume salesman started TGI Fridays in 1965 so he could meet attractive airline “stewardesses” and fashion models who lived near the Queensboro Bridge in Manhattan? Did you know that Denny’s was originally a small donut shop in Lakeview, California, or that Applebee’s original name was TJ Applebees’s Edibles and Elixirs in Atlanta? Someday, we might stumble upon a MadCap coffee in San Francisco or a Winchester in Greenwich Village. You never know.

With that said, I choose to frequent locally owned restaurants because I find the menu items more stimulating to the eye and my palette. But then again, I can’t deny the Bonefish Grill for its tasty Cobb Salad, On The Border for its addicting salsa or Ruth’s Chris for its mouthwatering Filet Mignon.

Houlihan’s, on the other hand, is a restaurant that I have never been to. I checked Houlihan’s website prior to my visit and found their site to be an enticing preview of what to expect at this new, upscale, casual dining place in Breton Village Mall. My wife, Elena, and I arrived just as the sun was setting. The curved patio that wrapped around the front of the restaurant was still busy with patrons sipping on cocktails and relishing after dinner conversations.

Our hostess sat us in a booth across from the open kitchen. Coincidentally, our booth was right across the aisle from a large table that appeared to be the executive chef and restaurant general manager hosting a tasting for their corporate team or owners. I thought about changing seats so I wouldn’t be too obvious with my intentions, but I elected to stay put so I could get a glance at the range of dishes that were being presented to the corporate group.

Pam or Pamelita, as her co-workers fondly call her, warmly greeted us as if we were regulars. She upsold us on their specialty cocktails and we obliged without hesitation. Elena’s Skinny Rita margarita was thirst quenching. The overly salted glass rim from my Cuervo 1800 Grand Margarita came close to spiking my blood pressure to celestial levels.

IF YOU GO

Houlihan’s

Where: 1968 Breton Road SE, Grand Rapids 49506

Hours: 11 a.m. to midnight daily

When we dined: July 11, 2012

Wait to be seated: Immediately

Wait for food to arrive: 10 minutes

Dress code: Casual

Ambience: Cozy setting inside with lots of wood. Open kitchen. Excellent patio setting.

Noise level: Conducive to table conversations

Parking: Mall parking

Price range: \$3.50 to \$30

Credit cards: All major credit cards accepted

Alcohol: Full Bar and Wine List

Reservations: 616-957-1683 or houlihans.com

Call them: 616-957-1683

Connect: houlihans.com

I was unusually indecisive after studying the dizzying number of items on the main menu; not to mention the other menus that were available on the table. There was the drink menu, the specials menu and the featured plates menu, which indicated items could be ordered in half portions (a wonderful idea only to find out that not all the items were available in half portions).

We consulted with Pameilta on her recommendations and selected the Wild Mushroom and Arugula Flatbread (\$8.25), the Seared Ahi Tuna Wonton (\$8.95) and one order of the Creekstone Farms Black Angus mini-Burger (\$3.50). While I was on a roll, I asked Pameilta to go ahead and also bring out the sinful Disco Fries (\$4.95).

Despite my aversion to sloppy renditions of fries before 2:30 a.m., I had to sample the heart-wrenching bowl of fries topped with melted mozzarella and slow cooked pot roast gravy. This Canadian contribution to comfort food, called poutine, dubiously originated in sophisticated Quebec, of all places. The original used cheese curds instead of the mozzarella and plain beef gravy instead of pot roast. Folks from New Jersey coined the term disco fries as a late-night “drunk” meal for the after bar crowd. While I enjoyed the taste of the pot roast, this dish is definitely best appreciated after an enormous amount of alcohol. The melted mozzarella was inseparable like a thick clump of glue.

Thankfully, the mini-burger was as good as its description on the menu and satisfying in appearance. The three-bite burger had a fluffy bun and a patty that was moist and perfectly seasoned.

When Pamelita inquired about the flatbread we ordered, I had to point out to her the limp crust that bowed down to the weight of the tasty mushrooms, pesto, roasted garlic puree, cheese and truffle vinaigrette. Elena and I decided to pass on Pamelita’s plea to reheat the flatbread.

We expected a wonton stuffed with tuna tartare, instead, we were presented with slices of pink tuna meat with an open fried wonton wrapper topped with Napa slaw garnish. It was like craving an eggroll, but instead, receiving a plate of ground pork with a side of fried egg roll wrappers. My impression would be reversed had the menu been more accurate in its description.

I noticed these amazing looking bowls of Ramen Noodle presented to the Chef’s table across the aisle. I asked Pamelita if I could have a half portion so I could sample the irresistible Asian delight (besides, the restaurant claimed to offer many half portions). After a few minutes, Pameilta approached our table, and I could see by her countenance that she was about to deliver some bad news. “The kitchen says we can’t provide half-portions because we don’t have smaller bowls.” I was dumbfounded given the assortment of bowls I saw whisk past me during service.

I received a hot bowl of the house-specialty French Onion Soup (\$2.50 as an add on to my steak order). Houlihan's version comes with a luscious layer of melted Gruyere cheese and just the right amount of caramelized onions with the broth. It was not my Ramen Noodle, but thank goodness it was good.

As much as I wanted to order a large piece of steak, my more rationale self selected the 4-ounce filet (\$12.50) as the perfect portion for my entrée. I found the filet a good value given that it was cooked to my medium-rare preference and was juicy enough to satisfy my craving. The accompanying mashed potatoes were too thick for my liking and could have easily used more butter. Just like the flatbread, my asparagus was limp.

Elena likes to eat items on the dish separately (vegetables first, then the berries and lastly the fish) and she thought her Tilapia was good. I am not certain what inspired the culinary team at Houlihan's to combine an Almond Crusted Tilapia (\$14.15 small/\$16.25 large) with fresh berries, beurre blanc and asparagus. Perhaps, it could be some kind of Scandinavian dish or even an Eskimo comfort food. She would have given the dish a more positive score had the fish been layered with less almond breading.

Pamelita recommended The Best Apple Pie to end our experience on a positive note only to find out minutes after we ordered that the kitchen had already run out of the popular dish. Pamelita apologized profusely. She brought us the Carrot Cake that came in a mini-pint and told us that it was on the house. Good move on her part.

I asked for a cup of espresso -- only to be disappointed again -- when I was told that the machine was broken.

Despite the mediocre execution of the menu and lack of management engagement with the guests, I would have to say that Pamelita made our experience quite enjoyable with her invigorating energy and witty comments to appease discontented guests. Incredible servers are often forgotten in this era of celebrity chefs. It was clearly evident this evening that Pamelita gave us a good reason to come back.

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