

Turkey Joe's: more than wings

Pub-grub menu is nicely executed

By Marty Rosen • Special to The Courier-Journal • June 21, 2008

From the minute I heard about Turkey Joe's, I was pumped at the thought of cardamom-laced coffee, lamb pilaf and all the fragrant spices of the Ottoman court. Instead, I stepped through the door into an exotic palace of televised sports.

An unbroken line of TV screens glowed on every wall, flashing action-packed images of basketball, baseball, hockey and golf.



Photos by Chris Hall, The Courier-Journal

It turns out that Turkey Joe's isn't run by an immigrant from Istanbul. It's an east Louisville sports bar. I tend to be skeptical about dining in sports bars. It's rare to find one that puts interesting food on the table. And I tend to be skeptical about restaurants situated on the clean-scrubbed, impersonal stretches of Hurstbourne Parkway that seem utterly unconnected to any sort of real neighborhood.

And finally, I tend to be skeptical about restaurants like Turkey Joe's that make such a big deal of their chicken wings that they offer a full dozen sauce options, gilding the lily of Buffalo heat levels with such inventive riffs as sesame-hoisin, sweet chili, honey chipotle, garlic Parmesan and spicy peanut. Call me old-fashioned, but I reckon once a kitchen crosses the five-sauce barrier, it's just showing off.

Still, I was willing to give the wings a try -- and never one to shrink from a challenge, I opted for a sauce called "We Double Dare You." One wing in, I started carefully dabbing my eyes with a paper towel. Moments later, I broke out in a sweat. Shortly after that, one of the owners came around grinning and offered me a glass of milk -- which I tearfully declined. Instead, I took relief in a basket of warm corn chips and a relatively cooling bowl of fresh, cilantro-laden salsa. (Wings run six for \$4.99; 12, \$7.99; 24, \$14.99, etc.; a generous bowl of chips and salsa rings up at \$4.29.)

As my eyes and sinuses returned to normal, I realized it's a pretty neighborly place. The decor is a bright mix of red and something the owners have dubbed "wing sauce orange." The walls are bedecked with beer signs and Wildcat and Cardinal banners.

Service was relaxed but efficient. Servers and owners were greeting customers by name, and vice versa. The vibe was loose and laid-back -- and yet it seemed as though everyone on staff was eagerly competing to deliver bottles of Guinness and Goose Island, refill water glasses and deliver piping-hot plates to eager diners.

And what's on those plates is worth checking out. The chef, Chuck Starcher, is a graduate of Sullivan University's culinary arts program whose resume includes four years as sous chef at Napa River Grill. At Turkey Joe's, he's put together an inexpensive, nicely executed pub-grub menu with a pleasantly individual feel about it.

As the name suggests, turkey plays a role -- specifically deep-fried turkey, which shows up in a traditional fried turkey dinner (complete with cranberry sauce, \$9.99) and a Hot Brown (\$9.99).

In both cases, hefty portions of white meat are carved into handsome, moist slabs. A thick brown gravy flavored with savory turkey drippings covers a pile of chunky, buttery mashed potatoes. The Hot Brown lacked visual appeal: It was perched on clunky slabs of "Texas toast" and needed a longer run under a hot broiler to give the overabundant cheese sauce a bubbly, golden surface, but it made a rich, hefty meal nonetheless.

Plump, fresh fillets of cod (dinner, \$10.95; sandwich, \$8.99) were hand-breaded in a crisp, salt-and-pepper cornmeal mix drawn straight from the Green River fish-fry tradition -- fillets wrapped in a crust that shattered nicely under the fork.

For fans of Ollie's Trolley, the most compelling reason to visit may be Joe's Burger (\$7.95), an upgraded riff on the classic Ollie Burger. The spice mixture isn't a perfect match, but it's a fragrant mix of coriander, cumin, paprika, plenty of garlic powder and a slice of mozzarella that captures the spirit, if not the absolute essence, of the original. And the Joe's Burger has the advantage of being grilled, made of hand-formed ground chuck and served on a tall, sturdy bun.

House-made peanut butter pie (\$4.39) made for a grand closing course -- a wedge of extraordinarily light mousse rested on a bed of chocolate crumbs, all deftly decorated with a drizzled grid of chocolate syrup.

Turkey Joe's



Address: 2809 N. Hurstbourne Parkway.

Telephone: (502) 327-9464.

Web: www.turkeyjoes.com.

Cuisine: Pub food.

Alcohol: Full bar; specialty cocktails; a good list of bottled beers.

Vegetarian: Limited options; ask your server for accommodations.

Price range: Inexpensive; nearly every item on the menu comes in under \$12 (the exceptions are a 10-ounce rib-eye, \$14.99, and a full slab of ribs, \$15.99). Exclusive of alcohol, two people can eat to guilty excess for under \$25.

Reservations: No, call ahead for large parties.

Credit cards: AE, Discover, MC, V.

Smoking: No.

Access: The restaurant appears to be fully accessible for people using wheelchairs.

Hours: Monday-Thursday, 11 a.m.-11 p.m.; Friday-Saturday, 11 a.m.-2 a.m.; Sunday, 11 a.m.-9 p.m.