

Boston Sunday Globe Dining Out – April 21, 1991

Author: Brian McGrory

This is the rarest of modern restaurants, one that has no theme, no baseball cards imbedded in the bar and football helmets on the wall, no electric train clicking on its tracks above the dining room, not even a host in full pirate costume leading diners to their tables.

O'Hara's, the storefront bar and eatery tucked into the Highlands section of Newton, is about food, a place where the thoughtful owners, by design, have made a statement that gimmickry be damned. The result is quite pleasing. This is a classic neighborhood grille, complete with gracious, paned windows, a sprawling but perpetually crowded bar, a chalkboard full of daily specials and prices that allow you to return time and time again. Dinner for two, with cute-food appetizers, salad, heaping entrees and native Alden Merrell desserts, runs about \$40, tip included. For far less, patrons can order very good and inexpensive pizza.

O'Hara's is a handsome saloon, with hardwood floors and touches of hunter green throughout that inspires loyalty from lawyers and laymen, an establishment reminiscent of the swank neighborhood bars that cater to the powerful and power hungry of Capitol Hill. We found no Sam Malone on the bartending staff here, not even a Woody Boyd, but the service staff seemed too busy for the banter that abounds on "Cheers". So busy, in fact that potential patrons should plan to wait for one of the coveted tables, even on an off night. Strangely, O'Hara's dedicates far more space to the rectangular bar, with just a few tables in a corner of the barroom and several more in an adjacent, compact dining room.

We drew the misfortune of being assigned a table in the bar, with a full dishwasher view and a breeze from the swinging kitchen door. There is a simple rule of thumb in the restaurant industry: When a guy from a newspaper shows up to eat a meal and offer a critique, do not sit him in the kitchen. The unsolicited advice here is not to sit diners in those absurd corner barroom tables. But that is our only complaint of the evening.

On the matter of food, it was largely delightful. For starters, the corned beef and cabbage soup offered during our visit was resplendent with chunks of corned beef, surrounded by strips of cabbage in a meaty broth; a good Irish stew in a good Irish bar, and it was not even St. Patrick's Day. The \$5 order of nachos was a standard platter of chips covered with cheese, with sour cream and other accompaniments offered on the side. All large enough for a herd rather than a couple. Nachos Supreme and Nachos Grande can be had for \$6 and \$6.25, respectively. Salads were standard and good. For the main course, the 10-ounce broiled sirloin steak, for \$10.50, was a fine smoky strip of charred meat, cooked to a pink perfection on the inside, and served with diced potatoes and onions. A carnivore-companion awarded it a thumbs up.

The usual broiled lamb steak, with mint jelly on the side, for \$9.95, was also a hit. The thinly cut steak, with its bone in, covered the better part of the plate, representing a good buy. Other blackboard offerings during that visit included a ribeye steak smothered in Swiss cheese, onions and peppers; London broil au jus; baked scrod; and chicken coq au vin, which was sautéed boneless breast of chicken with tomatoes, mushrooms and scallions, topped with a cognac supreme sauce.

The pizza is delicious and topped with the standard offerings. The lunch business is also brisk, with workers surrounding the bar for burgers and other inexpensive sandwiches, and watching the day's sporting events and news on several televisions.

And take in the Alden Merrell cheesecakes, made in Alden Merrell stores in nearby Newton Center, all priced modestly at about \$2 a slice.