

## **Boston Sunday Globe Dining Out – September 13, 1998**

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O'Hara's has several quirks that should drive customers away.

There's the no-credit-card policy, which sent us scrambling to a nearby bank machine for cash. There's the no-reservations policy, which kept us waiting for a table for more than an hour on a recent Friday night. And there's the parking situation: There isn't much of it. So there must be a logical reason for why O'Hara's is consistently packed to capacity for both lunch and dinner, on weekdays and weekends, week in and week out.

Here's why: Thick, sweet corn chowder made with whole, crunchy corn kernels (cup \$2.50, bowl \$3.50). Light, crusty pizzas (\$7.25 and up) redolent with basil. Firm, flaky blackened salmon with a bold Cajun bite (\$11.95). Smooth, custardy Boston cream pie sheathed in a layer of paper-thin chocolate (\$2.95).

Factor in reasonable prices, inviting ambiance and good-natured staff and you'll understand why O'Hara's has been a Newton Highlands mainstay for 13 years. This is a place that has mastered the art of casual, quality neighborhood dining.

John O'Hara, a Waltham resident, opened the restaurant in 1985 after being laid off from a job in the corporate world. His father, Curt (a former manager at Finnerty's in Wayland), and brother, Karl, soon joined him in the venture, making O'Hara's a true family operation. Business has been booming ever since.

Little wonder. Even the restaurant's exterior, draped in a gorgeous rainbow of petunias, impatiens and geraniums, seems to beckon visitors. Be prepared to wait patiently for a table. Seats at the bar are first-come first-served, but time will pass more quickly if you can commandeer a barstool.

Take comfort in knowing that, once seated, good food will be your reward. Like the corn chowder, "crazy bean" soup (cup \$1.75, bowl \$2.50) is divine. Chunky and chili-like, it is loaded with kidney and black beans, plus lean hunks of sausage that impart a salty bite.

Appetizers, including boneless Buffalo wings doused in hot sauce (\$5.50) and potato skins smothered in mozzarella and bacon (\$5.75), are simple but satisfying. Pizzas are made with wonderfully crunchy crusts and a cornucopia of toppings, from basic pepperoni to stewed tomatoes and marinated chicken. Ours, topped with deep-fried chicken, sliced summer tomatoes and dollops of ricotta (\$11.50), was excellent.

Grilled honey dijon chicken (\$8.95) is bathed in a deliciously sweet mustard sauce flecked with tiny mustard seeds. Sesame stir-fried chicken (\$9.50), tossed in a jumble of broccoli, red peppers and water chestnuts, has a pleasant, nutty flavor, although its bed of dry chow mein noodles seems out of place.

A hearty, white-meat chicken pot pie (\$7.25) scooped into a crusty bread bowl is one of the best versions of this Yankee dish we've tried. Tender London broil (\$9.50), served au jus, is also award-winning material.

Only a few items fell short of expectations. Fajitas (\$8.95) with sirloin and peppers are respectable but undistinguished. And a vegetarian pasta dish, the lemon pepper saute (\$8.50), is a nice concept that just doesn't work. We like peas, scallions, corn and angel-hair pasta. But combine those ingredients with lemon-pepper seasoning and the result is a jarring combination of tastes and textures.

Save room for desserts (\$2.95); they're worth it. We tried the marvelous Boston cream pie and the equally delectable carrot cake, served moist, crumbly and crowned with cream-cheese frosting as light as whipped cream. They make for a truly sweet ending.