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Column: Patricia Talorico



All the Irish comforts, with a side serenade Kildare's relaxes for Sunday brunch

Staff reporter Patricia Talorico offers the scoop about dishes and drinks or nibbles and noshes at casual restaurants. Dish alternates with Eric Ruth's dining reviews in 55hours PLUS

Did you know that brunch, a meal beloved by many restaurant patrons, is the bane of restaurant cooks?

Well, it is if you believe chef Anthony Bourdain's wickedly funny "Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly," an insider's account of the restaurant industry. "Cooks hate brunch," Bourdain writes in his 2000 book. "Nothing makes an aspiring Escoffier feel more like an army commissary cook, or Mel from Mel's Diner, than having to slop out eggs over bacon and eggs Benedict for the Sunday brunch crowd."

Puh-leaze. That same crowd, in which I proudly include myself, can kiss the Blarney stone that Bourdain's cranky book apparently hasn't had any impact on the toques manning the stove at Kildare's, an Irish pub in downtown West Chester, Pa.

This charming little piece of Dublin is the place to find a brew, a brogue, a ballad and a fun, Irish-style Sunday brunch.

In 2003, Kildare's owner Dave Magrogan shipped in 40 containers of Irish artifacts and antiques to transform the former "The Restaurant & The Bar" at 18 Gay St. into an authentic Irish experience.

Secondhand shops were pillaged for the bric-a-brac on the walls and the several bars installed throughout the eatery, which offer a wide selection of pubby stalwarts such as Guinness, Harp and Murphy's, have Gaelic roots. One bar was salvaged from a 120-year-old pub in Wexford, a tiny town about three hours from Dublin.

Customers also can grab one of the wooden bench seats near a fireplace and peruse a current Irish newspaper or gather a large group at the tables and booths tucked in a room known as the Cottage Dining area.

Is everything authentically Irish at Kildare's, which has two other locations in King of Prussia and Manayunk? Not quite. While smoking has been extinguished from all pubs in Ireland, you can still light up in parts of Kildare's. (Pennsylvania, unlike Delaware, hasn't adopted a smoking ban.)

Sensitive noses picked up a smoky scent in the doorway of the West Chester pub, but, Kildare's does have a no-smoking section, and when we sat there during a recent Sunday visit, we could detect no invading cigarette aromas.

Drink and food specials are offered throughout the week, and the pub, smack dab in a college town, is rollicking on Friday and Saturday nights.

Keep an eye out for local celebrity Bam Margera. The skateboard-riding host of the twisted MTV series "Viva La Bam" and his posse have been known to sometimes rest elbows at Kildare's.

The much more low-key brunch, which runs Sundays from 10 a.m. until 2 p.m., attracts an all-ages crowd.

Whether hoisting a Boddingtons, a bloody Mary (\$3.50) or a cup of Bewley's Irish breakfast tea (\$1.95), snacking on breakfast boxty (\$8.95) - scrambled eggs, tomatoes, cheddar and potatoes wrapped in a potato pancake - in this convivial atmosphere is a leisurely way to end the weekend.

Musicians play Emerald Isle tunes from noon to 4 p.m., and during this jam session, patrons tend to listen, rather than sing along, to renditions of "The Wild Rover" and other popular Irish drinking songs.

Share an appetizer of the excellent Irish smoked salmon (\$8.95) and you shouldn't be disappointed. Several large, thick slices of pink-fleshed, smoky fish are accompanied by water crackers, a generous dab of whole-grain mustard mayonnaise and greens tossed with sun-dried tomatoes and a light balsamic dressing.

The brunch menu includes a wide assortment of salads, such as honey- and tarragon-glazed chicken (\$5.95) or grilled shrimp (\$7.95) served with soda bread. Sandwiches - you choose the bread, the fillings and the dressings - are \$7.95, and burgers and crab cakes range from \$6.95 to \$8.95.

The classic, beer-battered fish and chips (\$10.95) is a treat. Two fillets of white fish, dipped into an ale batter, are crunchy and not at all greasy and are served with a generous side of french fries. Dip the fish in the homemade tartar sauce or, better still, shake on some malt vinegar. The tables at Kildare's also have other Irish condiments like jars of whole-grain mustard and Goodall's of Dublin steak sauce.

But I find the breakfast offerings most interesting, especially the full Irish breakfast (\$8.95). The meal consists of two eggs, rashers - an Irish-style bacon very similar to ham - bangers (grilled sausage) and a hearty hunk of toasted caramelized-onion bread.

The dish also comes with black and white "puddings," an Irish breakfast meat often made with ingredients that are best not discussed at the breakfast table. Let's just say the puddings, essentially sliced blood sausage, reminded me of a meatier version of scrapple. McCann's Irish oatmeal, served with raisins, walnuts, cinnamon and brown sugar or mixed berries, is \$3.95, and Kildare's always has a pancake of the day. When we visited, the gut-busting dish consisted of four jumbo pancakes stuffed with fresh strawberries (\$6.95).

Request "Danny Boy" and wind down with a warm dish of apple crumble (\$6.95) or Bailey's cheesecake (\$4.95) - if you've got the room.

Contact Patricia Talorico at 324-2861 or ptalorico@delawareonline.com.

Kildare's

Where: 18 W. Gay St., West Chester, Pa.; (610) 431-0770; www.kildarespub.com

Hours: 11 a.m.-2 a.m. Mondays through Saturdays; 10 a.m.- 2 a.m. Sundays.

a la carte

Hey, sticky-fingered patrons - don't even think about snatching any of the Irish treasures off the walls. Kildare's management is one step ahead of you and has glued everything down. Souvenir pint glasses and ashtrays can be purchased in the gift shop.

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