

THE BUFFALO NEWS CITY & REGION

Appetizing food and a heapin' helpin' of hospitality

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on September 5, 2010 - 12:01 AM

It was nearing the end of a long, oppressively hot and unmercifully dry summer, so that could only mean one thing: road trip!

But where to go when Western New York suddenly turns into Arizona?

Why, the waterfront, of course.

Aren't times like these part of the reason we so willingly endure phenomena such as lake-effect snow? Lakes were definitely meant for summertime enjoyment.

On this particular day, the prospect of a road trip seemed doubly inviting. Not only could we visit some family along the inviting shores of Lake Ontario, maybe get out and grab a bite or two to eat, but we could make a day of it by sticking around for that evening's open-air movie at the Wilson Harbor.

What was playing? I asked.

"Who cares?" came the response. "It's free!"

And that, friends, was logic with which I simply could not argue.

So we ended up at the Wilson House Restaurant and Inn, right in the heart of downtown Wilson. Since it was still quite hot and dry, we eschewed an offer to sit on the nice patio and took up residence right in front of an A/C outlet along a front wall.

Who's cool now?

For a place that's been standing longer than even the gnarliest trees in these parts (built in 1844), the cobblestone Wilson House seems remarkably well-preserved. It's not overly fancy, mind you, but warm and inviting nonetheless.

Joining myself, wife Teresa and daughter Steffany were my brother Mark, his wife, Sue, and their daughter, Lisa, along with her boyfriend, Steve. Between the seven of us, we managed to sample a goodly portion of the menu.

From the appetizer menu we had the French onion soup (\$3.50, or \$1 extra to add to your entree), and from the daily specials, the tomato-bean-sausage soup (which I added as a side to my entree, no extra charge).

Both were very good. The T-B-S soup offered a tasty tomato base that wasn't overly thick, like a tomato soup. There weren't a lot of beans in mine, but there was plenty of tasty sausage, and it really complimented things nicely, imparting a strong, smoky flavor. The French onion was solid, with lots of croutons and a nice, crusty cheese topping.

For entrees, we hit a chef's special (artichoke and scallops pasta, \$16.95); the seafood offerings (seafood jambalaya, \$17.95); the salad section (taco, \$7.25); and the main entrees (boneless chicken breast, \$8.95).

The sandwich selection took a triple hit: blackened chicken (\$6.95), marinated portobello mushroom (\$6.50) and a good ol' monster cheeseburger (half-pounder, \$5.75).

The seafood jambalaya was the hit of the evening, at least as far as I was concerned, since it was my dinner. A whopping platter of scallops, shrimp, mussels and Andouille sausage in a creole sauce served over rice. It was more seafood and creole than rice. At first glance, I never thought I would finish it. But I did. It was that good.

The sauce was a thick, red Cajun delight, chunked up by peppers and celery and tomato. It's the perfect accompaniment for seafood, as Andouille Louisianans have known for, oh, a couple hundred years or so. In this particular mix, the scallops were huge and unusually tasty, the shrimp plentiful, the mussels (in the shell) added a nice touch, and the spicy sausage was the perfect topper. Well worth the price.

Ditto for the chef's special: another plateful-and-then-some, consisting of spaghetti bathed in a Parmesan broth and accompanied by finely chopped artichoke, scallops and tomatoes. Being a broth and not a sauce, the parmy topping was a little thin, but oh-so-tasty. Again, huge scallops, fresh tomatoes and thin spears of artichoke combined to form a tasty concoction.

The boneless breast was served with sauteed spinach, roasted red peppers and provolone cheese, but it was the spinach that really set it off.

The taco salad, relatively typical in a crispy tortilla shell, rivaled the jambalaya in size -- but again, was gone by the end of the evening. In fact, there were virtually no bags going home for the doggies on this outing; everything was consumed at the table.

The biggest complaint of the night concerned the blackened chicken, and that was only that the patty itself was on the small side.

"It had some kick to it, but I would have liked it a little spicier," Steffany said.

The portobello sandwich, served with sauteed spinach, red peppers and mozzarella on a bulky roll and topped with basil mayonnaise, was

another big hit.

"It tasted like it had been marinated in mushroom soup," Sue noted, adding that it was "very moist and tasty."

The burger? Well, let's face it: It's tough to mess up a burger. This one was a big bugger, thick and juicy and came with a heaping helping of fries. Satisfying, to say the least.

Wilson House offers up a wide-ranging menu with some tasty-sounding daily specials (on our trip they included monkfish and fresh clams). The dishes are appetizing, and the prices won't break the bank. It's all served up with a heapin' helpin' of hospitality that would have made Granny herself proud.

After our meal, we headed down to the harbor and settled in for the picture show. As we sat, I could feel droplets from the lake splashing over on us. Then I realized we weren't close enough for waves to be splashing over us.

Within seconds the skies opened up, the silver screen rolled up, and the flicker show was officially a wash. The only rain-out of the summer, and it had to come on our night out. Ain't that a kick in the pants? Oh well, at least we had an excellent meal and a nice visit.

Eating update

Trio's, my all-time favorite local "pizzeria," has added a couple of new touches to an already innovative menu -- although you'd better get there fast, because they may be gone with the summer heat. Their fresh-cut curly fries are simply the best in town, bar none, and now you can wash them down with root beer in chilled mugs.

Maybe it was the heat getting to me again, but to me it was the perfect summer combo.

NOTE: PRICES AS OF 2010