

THE CAPITAL TIMES

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THE WEEKEND OF FEBRUARY 2-3, 2008

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LifeStyle



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Liliana's gives extra kick to Creole

Naming a restaurant after your infant daughter, perhaps in hopes of someday passing on the business to her, shows the supreme confidence David and Tiffany Heide have in Liliana's, their new Fitchburg restaurant.

MICHAEL MUCKIAN
DINING OUT

Based on what David, a Fitchburg native who also serves

as chef, can do with Cajun and Creole cuisine, such a bet is not necessarily a long shot.

Liliana's is the Madison area's latest incarnation of New Orleans food, complete with the requisite beads, black wrought iron and moody photos of what appear to be street musicians. But the tired icons of Louisiana culture come packaged in an attractive new building across the parking lot from Bienvenuto's in Fitchburg's growing strip mall city, as pretty a piece of restaurant real estate as just about any in the area.

Fat Tuesday is coming up, and we were in the mood to *laissez les bon temps roulez*, let the good times roll. Unfortunately, service is still an issue at the three-month-old Liliana's, so the good times didn't really roll. Instead, they toddled, strolled and bumped through the dining room. Fortunately, the food and a couple of Turbodogs

Liliana's Restaurant

2951 Triverton Pike, Fitchburg; 442-4444;
 lilianasrestaurant.com

Hours: 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Mon.-Thurs., 11 a.m.-midnight Fri.-Sat., 5-9 p.m. Sun.

Parking; wheelchair access; credit/debit cards OK, no checks

★★★ out of ★★★★★

(\$4) from Abita Brewing Co. made the wait worthwhile.

Heide's menu has the requisite New Orleans dishes, including crawfish etouffe (\$15) and New Orleans-style bouillabaisse (\$19) with crawfish, crabmeat, shrimp, andouille sausage, tilapia and, of course, oysters. The lunch menu features a variety of po' boys (\$8-\$10), and for dessert there are beignets, Bananas Foster and bourbon chocolate pecan pie (\$4 each).

But Heide, who graduated from Le Cordon Bleu cooking school, brings what appears to be a brighter flavor palette to his roux, offering slight turns of taste, greater intensity of flavors and more interesting entrees that don't sacrifice authenticity by attempting to reach a little higher in delivery. We saw good things coming during the appetizer course, ideas that delivered better on their promises with the entrees.

The scallion herb hush puppies, which promised

to be stuffed with cheddar cheese and served with an aioli (\$7), were a pretty good start. The six puppies had been made from scratch, then deep-fried to a dark brown. I never thought you could do much to either help or harm the little doughballs, but these were very good.

Tender and moist on the inside, crisp on the outside, the puppies really didn't deliver cheddar at the level someone from Wisconsin might have expected, but it was laced throughout the dough, offering a more subtle presence.

The cornmeal-encrusted calamari (\$7) was more interesting. The fresh squid, mostly cut into rings, was lightly battered and lightly deep-fried. The calamari wasn't quite squeaky when you bit into it, but it was fresh. The slightly spicy remoulade that came with the appetizer was not the ancho lime sauce the menu promised, but it was a nice complement to the dish.

The vegetarian among us

found solace in the grilled seitan served with puree of sweet potato and a salad of field greens (\$15). Seitan, pronounced SAY-tahn, is compressed wheat gluten or "wheat meat" often used in commercially prepared vegetarian products designed to have the look and feel of meat. Heide blackened his seitan, which gave it a rich, somewhat smoky flavor.

Unfortunately, we got to talking about our trip to New Orleans last year with the waiter, and the conversation went on a little too long. During that time, the sweet potato puree cooled to a rather tepid orange pile, which made it less appealing, but didn't stop its consumption. The salad was dressed with a pleasant house vinaigrette.

My jambalaya (\$16) promised blackened crawfish, andouille sausage, tasso (Cajun smoked pork) and lardon (more pork, this time a type of fatty bacon). Peppers, onions and rice completed the dish. The crawfish wasn't blackened, but that was the only drawback.

The mix was rich and richly flavored with a good balance of taste and texture.

With a little more practice, Liliana's may get the good times rolling soon enough. But call early on Fat Tuesday. The restaurant stops taking reservations for the evening at 4 p.m.