



Oscar talk

Though 'No Country for Old Men' (left) is often mentioned as a favorite, the early Oscar buzz suggests a wide-open race.

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A&E

Dining Out

RESTAURANT REVIEW

New Orleans charm, adventurous menu at Liliana's

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FITCHBURG — Can a Wisconsin boy transform a Prairie-style building into a credible New Orleans restaurant? If you can ignore the fact that everything is new and sparkling clean, the answer is: pretty close.

Chef-owner David Heide, 28, who previously cooked at Cocoliquot, has created a menu that moves well beyond the familiar Cajun-Creole classics, even embracing Italians in the cauldron of New Orleans' culinary influences, along with the French, African, Spanish and Native American.

Given the adventurous attitude demonstrated by this menu, it's probably best not to overthink certain things, like the slightly bizarre inclusion of "Israeli couscous" at a restaurant that rhapsodically aligns itself with the Crescent City.

The classics are not overlooked, however, and you will find hush puppies, gumbo, jambalaya, etoufee and beignets. The restaurant is an obvious labor of love. It's named after Heide's baby daughter, and Heide built the striking wooden bar, tables and banquettes himself. Another staff multi-tasker is server Alex Herndon, who did iron work. On the walls are evocative photographs of New Orleans taken by the chef's father. Parry (who met Heide's mother in New Orleans), and there's an oyster bar and a cobblestone floor, all of which help you forget you're just off the main drag in Fitchburg, and it's snowing.

In addition to Heide, a graduate of the Cordon Bleu in Minnesota, the chef de cuisine is Annie O'Hara, who was recently named by Madison Magazine as one of the city's most promising chefs. Heide and O'Hara previously worked together at Cocoliquot.

The menu is a la carte, but you don't want to miss the salads. Although the combination of greens, nuts and bleu cheese is showing up everywhere these days, the version here is in a league of its own. That's because of the otherworldly dressing made with truffle oil and containing minced truffles, on a salad of Belgian endive, mixed greens, toasted walnuts and a refined Stilton, which is much less pungent than most bleus.

Another fine demonstration of the cheesemaker's art is found in chevre salad with mixed greens, lardons and another great dressing, this time a caramelized shallot vinaigrette.

An entree that apparently strayed across the Italian border was an exceptional dish that featured perfectly cooked orecchiette ("little ears" pasta) drenched in a mellow, fragrant saffron

cream sauce, with medium sea



A fountain and iron work evoke the French Quarter at Liliana's.

scallops that were golden and slightly crisp.

The idea of using the spicy sausage andouille as a "crust" on tilapia seemed improbable, but it worked beautifully. The intensity of the sausage was an effective foil for the mild white fish, and the accompaniment of oyster mushrooms and roasted yams also harmonized surprisingly well.

There were no surprises in the jambalaya, which broadcasts authenticity with tasso (a Louisiana specialty of boneless, heavily smoked pork shoulder), andouille, lardons and blackened shrimp, with its heat level poised comfortably on the fence between intense flavor and fire.

The bouillabaisse had a lot of crawfish, lump crab meat, shrimp, andouille and tilapia and oyster, but an opaque and uninteresting tomato sauce deadened what presumably would have been a lively interplay of flavors, and the addition of carrot slices added only more orangeness. The bouillabaisse and certain other dishes are served in sen-

sible but beautiful vessels that are more like urns than bowls.

Portions aren't huge here, so the desserts deserve attention. The Bananas Foster, flambéed in spiced rum in the kitchen rather than tableside here, get the flavor of the classic dessert right, with small pieces of ripe, soft warm bananas drenched in a smooth caramelized sauce. A little fruit tart was also impressive, with its puff pastry crust, soft custard and a colorful mix of fresh berries and fruit.

Patrons will also be able to enjoy live music in the new year (jazz, blues, zydeco, Dixie) with budding musicians from area high schools among those who will be invited to play.



A cobblestone walk with iron work and street lamps leads to the dining room.

DINER'S SCORECARD



State Journal

Restaurant: Liliana's

Location: 2951 Triverton Pike, Fitchburg (south off Hwy. PD)

Specialties: New Orleans cuisine, emphasizing local and seasonal ingredients.

Phone: 695-7593

Hours: Lunch 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Saturday. Sunday brunch will begin in January. Dinner 4 to 10 p.m. daily.

Price range: Appetizers \$6 to \$12; salads and soups \$4 to \$8; entrees \$15 to \$24; desserts \$3 to \$4.

Smoking: Permitted only on one of the two three-season patios with heaters.

Credit cards: Accepted

Accessibility: Yes

Reservations: Accepted

Bottom line: Lots of charm and some excellent food, top-notch service and reasonable prices. Not recommended for young children or vegetarians.

STEVE APPS — State Journal