

Chez Mike

Setting a higher standard for strip mall restaurants

OVERALL RATING ON A SCALE OF 1-10

Service 9 ■ Food 9 ■ Ambiance 8 ■ Price - \$\$\$

Who would guess such a culinary gem would be buried in an East Greenbush shopping plaza? I'm not too proud to say, "Not me!" But, I'm open-minded and when the recommendation came along to try Chez Mike, located in the Hannaford Plaza off Routes 9 and 20, I was intrigued – and as it turns out, happily surprised.

My dining companion, Peter, and I tried Chez Mike just a few weeks ago and discovered what a dedicated, imaginative and talented chef is capable of – no matter where his restaurant is located. In this case, the chef is Mike Cohen, a Culinary Institute of America graduate and former chef at Lipperas in Chatham. It was in the spring of 2008 when he took the plunge and opened his own restaurant, where he serves high-quality, inventive American food where local and seasonal items are the highlight of his ever-changing menu.

We walked in at about 6:30pm on a Friday evening to find the place more than half-filled – clearly a testament to the restaurant's success. It's challenging enough to open a new restaurant, but to do so in such a rocky economic climate in an out-of-the-way location would seem to be pure masochism. So it was encouraging to see that the restaurant has not only been able to survive, but to attract a healthy crowd. The modern, comfortable space is long and narrow, with a small bar located in the back. There are red leather booths along the perimeter and several tables in the center, where we were seated.

After our server politely greeted us, she took our drink order and pointed out that in addition to the menu items, a number of specials were listed on a large chalkboard. A quick perusal of the respectable wine and cocktail list led to a glass of the Zardetto Prosecco Brut (\$6) for me and a Classic Mojito (\$8) for Peter. Both were light, crisp and "summery" choices that likely wouldn't interfere with our meals.

As we enjoyed our drinks we debated about how to start our meals. All of the appetizer choices, including the House Made Country Pate and Chopped Salad with Crispy Artichokes, are creative but not ostentatious, and all are smartly priced around \$8. I couldn't help but order the intriguing-sounding Grilled Romaine Heart with Feta Cheese, Roasted Red Pepper and balsamic dressing (\$8) from the specials board. Peter opted for the Fried Calamari (\$8.99) off the regular menu.

After our order was placed, we enjoyed a small loaf of crusty, yet delicate French baguette served

with house-made kalamata olive butter. You read that right: olive butter - sweet, salty, creamy heaven-on-bread. If you pay close attention you'll likely catch other diners licking the butter plate when they think no one is watching. It's seriously that good. Rumor has it that the restaurant will sell it to you so that you can enjoy it at home, but personally, I like being able to fit into my clothes without fear of popping a button or busting a zipper.

Once our appetizers arrived, I boldly dove right into the calamari, which was lightly coated in seasoned flour, fried and served alongside a "spicy" marinara sauce. Truthfully, it's rare to find bad calamari and this was no exception. But, if I had to nit-pick, the sauce could have used a little more spice to stand up to the buttery calamari. This minor criticism did not, however, prevent us from polishing off the plate.

And just how does grilled Romaine compete with fried calamari? As it turns out, not only did it hold its own, it surpassed the calamari. This wonderfully simple plate epitomized summer; the lovely charred leaves of Romaine were grilled just enough to give it added crunch and a smoky flavor. The whole Romaine heart was topped with chopped roasted red peppers and small chunks of feta and the entire plate was drizzled with a sweet balsamic dressing. The flavors and textures made this a perfectly harmonious dish, and quite honestly, my favorite of the evening.

Next came the entrees. I had the Mustard Seed Encrusted Seared Sea Scallops over Fennel (\$11.99). It was actually listed on the menu as an appetizer, but it sounded so good I chose it as my main dish. After quizzing the waitress for her recommendation, Peter ordered Spinach & Feta Lasagna, (16.99). It is worth noting that Chef Mike is a master with meat, especially Pork. So I am confident that anything we ordered – from the decadent Shabby Chic, a dish of BBQ pulled pork; roasted lobster tail and hush puppy pancake; to the Beef Short Ribs with Yukon Gold mashed potatoes – would have satisfied, if not delighted.

My plate featured three large scallops, nicely cooked, sitting atop a bed of pickled fennel in a pool of tangy beet reduction. The warm scallops and the cold, crunchy fennel was a fun combination, and the beet sauce served to amplify the more mild components. I was expecting more flavor from the mustard seed, however. Instead, the seeds provided a pleasing texture, but did not add the spiciness I was expecting and would have liked.

Peter's lasagna was nothing short of luxurious, with layers of rich, creamy cheese, pasta and an abundance of spinach. There was no lack of seasoning here either; the velvety sauce had a nice amount of garlic, basil and oregano. The poor guy; he found himself having to ferociously fend off my fork-wielding advances. This may not have been on the Weight Watchers list of recommended dishes, but it was completely comforting and worth the fight for every forkful I stole.

After a little encouragement from our waitress we decided to order dessert. But truthfully, because everything at Chez Mike is expertly and skillfully prepared, we knew this would not be a risk. All desserts are made in-house and include selections that showcase in-season fruits. One such example, which we ordered, was the Strawberry Rhubarb Crumble with homemade hazelnut cinnamon ice cream (\$6). And strictly in the name of "research" we also ordered the Chocolate Caramel Cake with whipped peanut butter mousse filling (\$6). Both were pleasing, but to the surprise of this chocoholic, the Strawberry Rhubarb Crumble was the better dessert. The crispy, buttery crumb topping blanketed a warm filling of ripe strawberries and tart, tender rhubarb. This was only enhanced by the melting pool of ice cream surrounding the crumble. No leftovers here.

The chocolate cake was filled with an outstanding peanut butter mousse, and the chocolate frosting was rich and thick, but the cake itself didn't seem quite chocolatey enough. This small detail aside, Peter and I somehow managed to finish this as well.

In this age of fast food and chain restaurants, it's refreshing to have this choice of fine dining prepared by a knowledgeable and inventive chef, featuring local and in-season ingredients. I encourage you to overlook the obscure location and join me in supporting this noble (and tasty) cause for yourself.

The total cost for one glass of wine, one cocktail, two appetizers, two entrees and two desserts (excluding tax and tip) was \$93.65.

Chez Mike is located at 596 Columbia Turnpike in East Greenbush. Dinner hours are 5pm-9:30pm Monday-Thursday; 5pm-10pm; Friday and Saturday and 5pm-9pm on Sunday. For more information call 479.4730 or visit www.chezmikorestaurant.com.

Christina DeMers is an online marketing manager, food blogger and amateur cook who lives in East Greenbush, but eats just about anywhere.