

TOP-NOTCH TONY'S DOES JUST ABOUT EVERYTHING RIGHT

BYLINE: Yolanda Wright - Contributing writer, Syracuse Post-Standard

When a new restaurant can fill two dining rooms before 6 p.m. on a Friday and have people in line waiting for tables, you know the secret's out about its food, service and prices.

Four of us joined the cheering section recently at Tony's Family Restaurant, which opened a few months ago on Burnet Avenue, and we enjoyed good food that tasted freshly prepared, as well as friendly, attentive service. Plenty of parking, generous portions and easy prices are sure crowd-pleasers, with most entrees costing less than \$10.

As a bonus, dining rooms are smoke-free during dinner, and one is available for smokers earlier in the day. Both rooms, separated by the entryway, are comfortable and simply decorated.

Slatted blinds cover the windows, and burgundy upholstered booths pull up to bare tables topped with white paper mats and napkins. Patterned carpeting and red brick walls add an old-fashioned look.

Tony's menu offers appetizers, soups and salads as well as burgers (\$4.75 to \$5.95), specialty sandwiches (\$4.95 to \$5.95), steaks and chops (\$8.95 to \$13.95), chicken (\$7.95 to \$9.95), veal (\$9.95 to \$10.95), Italian specialties, pizza and pasta. Entrees include salad and, except for pasta dishes, potato or pasta and Italian bread.

Daily specials are listed on a board at the entrance, and our waitress carefully repeated them, with prices. Prime rib is a special Friday and Saturday. A limited list offers wine by the glass or bottle, and we started with glasses of pinot grigio (\$3.75), iced tea (\$1.50) and coffee (85 cents).

Forgetting that "small" is a relative term when it comes to food, we decided to begin our meal by sharing the \$5.95 small garlic pizza appetizer. Delivered on a plateau and cut into eight slices, the thick-crust pie had a diameter of at least 9 inches, with every garlicky inch covered with hot melted cheese.

"You can take the rest home," our waitress said, when we asked whether there had been a mistake in the order. No mistake, and one of our companions had half a pie for the next day.

Salads, delivered with dressings on the side, were fresh and predictable, with iceberg lettuce, tomatoes, ripe olives, sliced onions and cucumbers.

Except for one entree, hot platters were filled with well-prepared dishes from a capable kitchen. Even the batter tasted good on deep-fried haddock (\$9.95), perfectly cooked, moist and full of flavor. Partnered by a good baked potato, coleslaw and tartar sauce, this Friday favorite was worth repeating.

Two grilled pork chops (\$8.95), attractively presented with char-grill marks, were tender and still soft, a rare change from cooked-to-leather chops I've tasted elsewhere. A cup of applesauce was a nice addition here along with a baked potato with sour cream.

Homemade lasagna (\$8.95), piping hot and daunting, could have fed two of us emerging from a daylong fast. Multilayered with cheeses, noodles and sauce, the soft, tasty slab was covered with zesty tomato sauce and accompanied by a pair of tender meatballs.

Our only disappointment came with chicken Florentine (\$9.95). Pounded thin, two boneless, skinless chicken-breast halves had been broiled too long before being served on a bed of creamed spinach with a light white wine sauce.

The chicken was dry and tough, and the deep grill marks we admired on the pork chops signaled trouble here.

This dish can work beautifully if chicken is seasoned and sauteed briefly on sides and then finished in the pan with wine sauce.

A side of angel-hair pasta with marinara sauce accompanied the chicken.

Other entree choices included eggplant Parmesan, cavatelli, gnocci or ravioli (\$8.95), pasta with meatballs or sausage (\$7.95), broiled haddock (\$9.95) and an evening special of sole au gratin stuffed with crab meat.

Tony's saved the best for last when it came to a generous slice of homemade apple pie (\$2.25), served warm and unadorned on a pretty glass plate.

Blue-ribbon quality and worth a detour, the pie had a delicious flaky golden crust, great flavor and, best of all, a thick filling of real apples with texture that has nothing to do with canned mush.

This could be the best apple pie I've ever tasted in a restaurant.

"It was made right in the kitchen here," our waitress said with pride. "It's Grandma's pie." No surprise there.

Our second pie choice, chocolate cream (\$2.25), literally paled by comparison, with an undercooked white crust, ordinary pudding filling and whipped cream.

Service was first-rate, not only from our capable waitress and young boys who quickly reset tables, but from water-pourers and a hostess who constantly reassured wannabe diners how long it would be before they would be seated.

Even a chef made the rounds, asking whether guests were enjoying their dinners.

Tony's Family Restaurant is making all the right moves. My only concern is whether a slice of warm pie will be left next time I come.

Yolanda Wright's weekly "Dining Out" review is based on an unannounced, anonymous visit.