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TOWN TAVERN

Royal Oak spot offers foods with unique twist, classy environment

The cover of Town Tavern's carry-out menu reads, "Welcome to the evolution of the neighborhood tavern!"

Turn the page for proof: There's lobster macaroni and cheese, honey maple pork chop, Boursin cheese-topped filet mignon and other tempting dishes that are far from typical tavern fare.

The eatery itself is also uniquely unlike a traditional tavern, with a gold-painted ceiling (there's real gold in the paint) and dark wood and art deco accents that combine to create a classy and comfortable 1930s-1940s feel, which was the goal of designer Ron Rea and primary owner Bill Roberts.

Roberts, who also owns the successful Beverly Hills Grill and Streetside Seafood in Birmingham, opened Town Tavern on June 25 in bustling downtown Royal Oak. In the space formally occupied by Italian restaurant Lepanto, the eatery has room for 107 inside and another 18 outside for those who want to dine under the stars and partake in some of the best people-watching around.

Town Tavern has a long bar with soft orange backlighting behind shelves of bottles. On the other side of a partition that splits the tavern in half, there's the main eating area of dark wood tables that stand

on original hardwood floors. Mohair covers the back of the booths. Enlarged postcard pictures of old Detroit buildings and black-and-white images of youth sports teams and scenes of life from decades past cover one wall. Diners enter the patio through 9-foot French doors that let light stream in.

Town Tavern only serves dinner, but Roberts hopes to eventually add lunch and a weekend brunch.

Shortly after its 4 p.m. opening on a recent Saturday, Town Tavern was still pleasantly empty enough for an intimate meal. We were seated at a half booth/half table topped with black paper place-mats and silverware rolled in black napkins. Staff in crisp white shirts and ties were prompt and eager to please. One young man frequently whisked over a water pitcher for refills.

The menu is rife with wines and Michigan micro-brews. On the fun side, there's lemonade cocktails and alcoholic drinks made with ice cream.

The list of bar plates, or appetizers, reflects the diversity of the rest of the menu. There's five spice calamari (\$8) and coconut almond chicken (\$8) that comes with apricot horseradish. We picked short rib tacos (\$7). Three mini-soft tacos came stuffed with salty, tender meat. Small cups of creamy avocado sour cream and salsa were the

perfect dipping sauces.

Fresh seafood dishes and specials are chalked on a board. The seafood menu changes daily; grilled tuna with shitake soy glaze (\$24) was one of several creative dishes offered during our visit. For one entree, we picked the filet mignon (\$25), which is topped with a melting hunk of creamy pepper Boursin cheese and onions and mushrooms. The large cut of tender meat was as smooth and soft as butter. The accompanying grilled asparagus was prepared perfectly, with a slight crunch and sweetness.

One of the Tavern's hottest sellers, the lobster mac and cheese (\$16) is also a winner. Tubetti pasta and bits of fresh lobster are tossed in a rich and creamy mascarpone cheese sauce. Larger pieces of lobster rest on a buttery breadcrumb topping. This unique twist on a classic comfort food was outstanding. Our sole gripe was the portion size — only about a cup and a half of food left us wanting more.

The roasted lemon pepper chicken (\$17), a half chicken marinated in lemon and herbs, was unremarkable. The chicken was mildly moist, but the curious brown sauce that it was served with was a bit too salty. It came with about a half-dozen green beans and sliced redskin potatoes. The potatoes were undercooked and crunchy.

Diners can add a variety of side dishes to their meals. We picked the truffle fries (\$5), surprising in both portion size and flavor. The gigantic mountain of skinny fries is easily enough for four people to share. The fries are tossed in a truffle oil that adds a very faint mushroom flavor and topped with parmesan cheese, chives and crispy shallots. This dish in itself is worth a visit to Town Tavern. The garlic spinach (\$4) is also a good



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Lobster macaroni and cheese and honey maple pork chop are served at the Town Tavern in downtown Royal Oak.

choice for a side dish.

For dessert, we picked a chalkboard special — blueberry pie ice cream (\$5) — and the BHG chocolate brownie (\$7). Both were wonderful. Two triangle brownies with a cookie crust were smothered in warm Sanders hot fudge and complimented with creamy vanilla ice cream from Ray's, a favorite local ice cream shop. The blueberry pie ice cream was just as tempting, with blueberries and sweet sauce swirled through three big scoops of vanilla ice cream.

Town Tavern became increasingly crowded as late afternoon turned into evening. As we nibbled on our sweet endings, we noticed that a basket of fresh bread was on every table around ours. We were never offered bread. Though much too stuffed to eat more, we inquired nonetheless. Our server said that she usually only gives bread to customers who order salad. She kindly sent us home with a sample in a doggy bag. The stubby, buttery breadsticks with a cheese topping were soft and tasty, even reheated

the next day in the microwave.

Despite its name, diners will definitely not find a casual, smoky neighborhood watering hole in Town Tavern. It's more of a bistro, offering a creative menu and relaxed atmosphere that's slightly upscale without being snobby.

As the menu notes, the evolution of the neighborhood tavern has arrived.

To prevent restaurants from giving special service, The Oakland Press dining reviewer is anonymous. Each review is generally based on a single visit.