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Molly Abraham:

Top of the Town

Eatery puts a delicious, upscale spin on basics

Molly Abraham

So simple, yet so right. That's what a friend said after his first visit to the new Town Tavern in downtown Royal Oak.

And it would be tough to improve on that summation.

Town Tavern follows the pattern of the neighborhood hangout -- only this one has food that puts it in another stratosphere.

Tables on the patio out front are prime. People seem quite willing to wait for one of the 18 seats accessed through big French doors. The restaurant's interior, though, is so appealing, it seems a shame not to take advantage of what designer Ron Rea put together.

The granite-topped bar on one side and the dining area on the other are separated only by a low, translucent partition. Underscoring the "town" aspect are the framed black-and-white photos of an earlier Royal Oak.

The staff is friendly and efficient, some faces recognizable from the days when the space housed Lepanto.

The menu ranges from basics such as cheeseburgers and fries to sophisticated dishes typified by one evening's special -- salmon topped with a delicious mix of arugula, grilled radicchio, fennel and mandarin orange segments lightly dressed with coriander vinaigrette. Yes, this is definitely an updated tavern.

Grazers are going to love the so-called Bar Plates, including an especially creative treatment of calamari, the crisp rings sparked with Chinese five-spice blend and served with a dipping sauce of ground garlic, chile sauce, soy sauce with a dash of Thai hot sauce.

There are choices for meat-and-potatoes diners, too. Solid entrees include New York strip steak, pork chop with hash browns, veal piccata and meatloaf with mashed potatoes.

The people's choice so far is the over-the-top version of macaroni and cheese, made with lobster and

mascarpone cheese.

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