

## LT's Grill offers new take on traditional barbecued ribs

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When someone suggested I try a new restaurant about a half-mile from my house, the first temptation was to resist. Surely, I wouldn't be fortunate enough to find good food so close to home, I told myself. This was one of those times when being wrong didn't bother me.

A recent trip to **LT's Grill** in Niskayuna proved to be an all-around delightful experience, from the thoughtfully prepared menu items to the skilled server who was always one step ahead of our needs. The **grill** opened a couple of months ago and is situated in Saint James Square, in a sprawling storefront that for years operated as a pharmacy. Two longtime friends, L.J. Goldstock and Tom Coppola -- "two Niskayuna boys, by the way," to quote the menu -- own and operate the restaurant. They also offer off-premises catering for large and small functions.

**New impression**

**LT's** forever changed my impression of "barbecue," which in the past I'd considered to be a messy, overly sweet red sauce that requires special eating skills and far too many napkins. Instead, the ribs are prepared with a dry rub seasoning and accompanied by a bottle of tangy barbecue sauce. I like the idea of having the sauce on the side because it gives diners the option of squirting on a little, a lot or none at all.

Dining companion Meat-and-Potatoes Guy was swayed by our server's description of the process and quickly settled on a full rack of beef ribs (\$19.95), listed on the menu as "Memphis style" and slowly cooked to "melt in your mouth." I opted for something less messy, choosing the Fiesta Fish (\$11.95), a baked tilapia encrusted with tri-color chipotle-lime tortilla chips. Each meal comes with two side dishes and homemade corn bread.

The limited dinner menu features eight entrees plus a few chalkboard specials. The night we were there, one of the specials was a pork tenderloin stuffed with blue cheese. It sounded intriguing but I decided to stick with one of the restaurant's traditional offerings. A word of warning for the weight-conscious: Unless you're interested in a baked or pan-seared salmon steak, this is not the place to visit if you're looking forward to something baked, broiled or poached. Meat Guy and I were plenty hungry, and so the hearty menu offerings suited us just fine.

It was about 6 p.m. on a Friday and business was just starting to pick up when we arrived. We were a little apprehensive when the hostess sat us within bird's-eye view of the kitchen, but the booths were high enough to block both the sounds and the view coming from the bustling kitchen. In fact, our location seemed to add to the atmosphere of the place, which is definitely casual and very family-oriented. At one point, we watched as one of the cooks snapped on a pig's snout and started joking with our server, a well-trained staffer who returned his teasing with a few barbs of her own. The good-natured cook turned out to be Goldstock, who we later learned was working the line because of a cook shortage that night.

After being seated, we were served baskets of popcorn and peanuts. We were careful to keep our pre-meal grazing to a minimum, as we knew we'd be ordering appetizers.

**Tasty appetizers**

For my appetizer, I chose potato skins filled with pulled pork and topped with cheddar Jack cheese (\$6.95). Meat Guy chose a dozen chicken wings, which he ordered cooked with dry rubbed seasonings and served with hot sauce and blue cheese for dipping. They can also be ordered in the traditional method of "mild" or "hot."

My two large skins were tasty and piled high with the tender pork. I would have liked the skins a tad crispier, but I'm guessing the sauce for the pork negated the opportunity for crunchiness. Meat Guy described his wings as "just the way I like them," meaning they were crispy, meaty and perfectly cooked. He had never had his wings prepared with dry seasonings and liked being able to dunk them in the hot sauce.

Earlier, we watched the mammoth platters of food coming from the kitchen, and so we asked the server to pack up the remainder of our appetizers for another day.

My tilapia was buttery and had a bit of a kick from the dried chipotle peppers, a treat I didn't notice until after I'd taken a few bites. My baked potato was perfectly cooked, but I was disappointed they offered a butter substitute instead of the real thing. The tangy coleslaw was good and had a vinegar base, with a

generous, interesting addition of what I later determined to be celery seed. The two pieces of corn bread were good but not outstanding.

The platter of ribs was enormous, and Meat Guy managed to make his way through less than half of the dozen or so portions on the plate. He could tell they were slow-cooked because they flaked off the bone and most of the fat had vanished in the cooking process. They were tender but "not mushy," he said, and he liked that the dry seasoning used on the beef was smokier than that used on the chicken wings. His meal was ordered with mashed potatoes but arrived with giant steak fries. I would have alerted the server to the error, but Meat Guy is considerably more subtle than I. And while he didn't rave about the fries, he did enjoy his side order of creamed spinach.

We departed with an abundance of leftovers, but not before splitting one of the many desserts (\$4.95) prepared on premises. I like a good piece of chocolate cake and decided on the restaurant's version -- baked with a smattering of coconut and chocolate chips -- over the other offerings that included apple crisp and peach cobbler. The dense texture of the cake resembled a fudgy brownie, which I liked, and it was so rich we were unable to take more than a couple of bites. It was a great ending to a great meal.

Need for decor

If I had one criticism of **LT's**, it would be the decor. In the first place, there wasn't enough of it. The word that comes to mind is "picnic-ky." The large, open area needs more than the occasional Western-style print or old riding saddle to fill the endless wall space. The place only just opened. So maybe the atmosphere is a work in progress.

A sampling of other menu items includes a grilled 8-ounce pork chop topped with citrus salsa (\$12.95), baked or pan-seared salmon (12.95), New York strip steak, beef brisket and an item called "Snort 'n Cluck," which is a half-rack of ribs and half chicken. Beer and wine are also available.

Our meal with tax, tip and sodas, came to \$73.53.

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