



# Houlihan's Expands Outdoors and Welcome Wow Bao

By Bryce Parks

Like so many other restaurants, Houlihan's, next to Q Casino, was a regular favorite of the *365ink* crew for lunch before it temporarily closed in 2019 due to COVID-19. But back they are, and they didn't just open the doors back up. Heck, they technically knocked a big hole in a wall and made a massive new door. It goes out to the incredible new outdoor dining space they have just completed while simultaneously announcing the arrival of the popular Asian to-go favorite Wow Bao to the cast. Okay, I think it's time we revisit Houlihan's and see what's new on Schmitt Island.

Let's start by going inside... then right through the restaurant and outside again... to the just-completed and opened outdoor patio now welcoming guests to Houlihan's. We talked with John Torres, Director of Hospitality for Q Casino and Resort, which operates Houlihan's, for the scoop.

"Last summer, in response to coronavirus, and as people desired to get out in public but avoid indoor spaces, we painted the pavement in the lot next to Houlihan's and set it up with picnic tables to make it as comfortable as we could, and it was really popular right away," he said. "This year, we planned on building that out."

They got a later start than expected because the pilings had to go down deeper than thought for the structure that holds up the impressive, covered patio. They put the finishing touches on it and opened the night of the last Back Waters Stage Concert.

"This is all caused by our reaction to our customers wanting to dine outside as opposed to inside all related to coming through that first year of COVID, and now that the Delta variant is prevalent, the timing is perfect to keep people happy and keep them coming out and feeling safe," says Torres.

"We added the giant doors that open 20 feet of the wall to allow fresh air into the inner dining area, which diners inside enjoy, too, and get a nice view of the outdoor patio from inside. We added radiant heaters over the covered portion of their patio, and eight of these heaters run the length of both sides of the covered space. They are very effective at adding a level of comfort to patrons as we combine to utilize this space well through fall into November."

Depending on people's tolerance for cool weather, this option keeps outdoor dining on the menu much longer for those who will only dine outside at this time.

"We also have outdoor-rated televisions, ceiling fans, speakers, a fire pit, and lighting, and it all comes together to create a really nice dining element."

It's so much more than just a patio next to a restaurant. This feels like a whole new dining venue to us as we enjoyed our massive Long Island iced teas and stuffed mushrooms on a warm September evening.

We highly recommend checking out the new addition for a night out with friends. It's a great atmosphere for conversation and drinks. Also, you know, the food's pretty darn good too.

As regular lunchers at Houlihan's, we're sorry that those hours have not yet returned to the popular eatery, but it's understandable. It's all predicated on staffing. Much like the rest of the country, finding enough help to be open for lunch every day is difficult right now, so they are focused on their peak dinner hours and days for the time being.



PITCHERS OF HOULIHAN'S FAMOUS LITS WITH A PINT... FOR SCALE



TERIYAKI CHICKEN AND KUNG PAO CHICKEN BOWLS AND BAO

The menu since re-opening is also just a tad smaller than when they closed in 2019 by just two or three entrees and a couple of starters. We found our favorites just fine. The Carolina burger and Brentwood chicken sandwich are repeat favorites for us but only after a round of the stuffed mushrooms and firecracker shrimp.

What we never had at lunch but tried for the first time last week was Long Island iced teas, or, as they call them, LITs. Where have these been all my life?! The mug (they call it a pitcher) was HUGE, especially for \$9.25, and they came in a rainbow of flavors: Premium, Georgia Peach, Kentucky, Long Beach, Tennessee, Raspberry, Texas, and Texas Beach. What does that taste like? You'll have to come and find out for yourself. Those are joined by a great cocktail and martini menu, a big draft and bottle selection, and 17 wines.

So, let's talk about Wow Bao.

Wow Bao is one of the new, popular, dark or ghost kitchen options that have hit the dining scene since COVID. Basically, a known national offering becomes available in a new market by utilizing the professional kitchen facilities of an exciting eatery and making an entirely new brand available for purchase, though usually only

to-go and delivery. Note, for example, the recent addition of Bennigan's offerings at River Rock Kitchen and Tap at the Holiday Inn in downtown Dubuque and MrBeast Burger at Red Robin.

Wow Bao is a fast-casual Asian concept with more than 350 "dark kitchen" locations across the US that feature steamed bao (a popular portable snack served throughout Asia), potstickers, steamed dumplings, and rice bowls.

The signature steamy buns pack big, bold flavors and unexpected fillings into an irresistibly craveable little package with five flavors to choose from: Teriyaki chicken, BBQ Berkshire pork, spicy Mongolian beef, cheeseburger, and whole wheat vegetable.

The potstickers and dumplings are additional features. Pan-seared with a crispy exterior (potstickers) or steamed to perfection (dumplings), both are packed with a flavorful, juicy interior. Choose from ginger chicken or green vegetable.

Dive into the rice bowls for a delicious medley of veggies and/or protein on top of long-grain jasmine rice. These Asian classic dishes were reworked by their chefs for optimal flavor with the options of teriyaki chicken, orange chicken, spicy Kung Pao chicken, or vegetable.

"Wow Bao works perfectly for us," says John Torres. "We do almost all of our cooking at Houlihan's from scratch, and Wow Bao is a small, easy production that we can add in to have one person prepping while they're taking orders. We're starting to see some really decent numbers coming in from Wow Bao, especially during the week. On weekends, we have to be careful that we're maintaining the needs of Houlihan's, so we may close Wow Bao to make sure that the quality of service does not falter. It's been very well received. We're looking for a modest level of return from this added-value dining option to best utilize our available labor and create that incremental revenue, and that's what we're seeing."

Wow Bao was once part of the Lettuce Entertain You Entertainment Group out of Chicago. Geoff Alexander, the current president and CEO of Wow Bao, took the brand private, and he's very particular about how Wow Bao is sold.

"We started off going only through Uber Eats and Grubhub," says Torres, "but we have players here at Q Casino who want to enjoy the product and even use a comp or voucher to try it, but there's no way to do that through the online apps. So we've expanded the availability to our on-site customers."

They have installed a new service window for Wow Bao inside the hall that connects Houlihan's to the Hilton Garden Inn. You can call ahead directly to Wow

Bao and pick up your order, bypassing the delivery services and their fees, and also utilize your Q Casino comps to enjoy these offerings. They are not yet officially serving Wow Bao to seated customers inside Houlihan's during open dinner hours, but it could be coming very soon. In fact, you may want to ask your server when you visit if that is an option: You just might be able to do that.

So, clearly, they didn't take the time off resting on their laurels. When life gave us lemons, they took in the customers' wants and needs and added a big dose of flair by bringing this favorite dining hotspot back to life with new amenities and new flavors. There's more adaptation to the "new normal" to come.

"We're looking to open a couple of more shifts very soon which would likely be lunchtime on Saturday and one shift on Sunday, lunch or dinner," says Torres. "And we're also soon going to be starting to do Houlihan's to-go out of the Wow Bao pick-up window. This new Houlihan's Express menu for lunch will let you get your favorites fast, even when the dining room is not open." ■



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NEXT TO Q CASINO  
1801 GREYHOUND PARK RD, DUBUQUE, IA  
563-585-5233  
HOULIHANS.COM/DUBUQUE  
Hours: Wed-Thu: 4-9 PM; Fri-Sat: 4-10 PM

**Wow Bao**  
PICKUP WINDOW VIA RIGHT  
ENTRANCE BY HILTON GARDEN INN  
563-585-3006  
WOWBAO.COM/LOCATION/  
WOW-BAO-RESORT  
Grubhub/Uber Eats Delivery Hours:  
Wed-Sat: 11 AM-4 PM  
Pick Up Hours: Wed-Sat: 11 AM-9 PM

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