

Noodles and Company

By Danny Fairchild

Let me start by saying that never have I been in a newly opened dining venue that so immediately and thoroughly had their stuff together as well as Dubuque's new Noodles and Company.

Seriously. Dubuque has waited a long damn time to get a Noodles et. al. around these parts. It's been especially hard since we lost our Fazoli's. So you can bet your fleur-de-lis that when Noodles and Company opened their doors, Dubuque showed up in a big way. But the staff was friendly and attentive without being intrusive, and everything went fast. At one point, I was looking around confused for some lids so we could take our leftovers home. Before I knew it, I had all the lids I needed and a bag with which to tote. So. Fast.

Seating is limited in their location at Wacker Plaza. I went with my partner and our two kids, 12 and almost 2. Two prime ages for eating noodles. When we got there, there wasn't a table open. By the time we were done ordering and I figured we had to get our food to go, the cashier pointed to a table that had magically opened up. So fast! I've eaten at other Noodles and Company locations, so I had some idea of the wait time for food. No kidding, the food was in front of us shortly after we'd filled up our fountain drinks at the Coke Freestyle machine. So fast, it freaked me the hell out. Any of you remember the Albert Brooks movie *Defending Your Life* where in the afterlife, no matter what you order, your food is immediately ready and specially made for you? It was almost like that. We rewarded their efficiency by also being efficient and freeing up the table, pronto. Didn't take but a few seconds after we vacated for that table to be wiped down and ready to go. We didn't feel rushed. We just felt like we were all on the same team. "Other people want to try this, let's help make it happen."

So, this is a big shout out to the team at Noodles and Company. My bar is set sympathetically low for a new restaurant staff ironing out the wrinkles. Noodles took a look at how low my bar is and said, "Come on, dude. Higher. Higher. Higher still. More. Good." And then they leap over the bar easily. Good

job, folks. Consider this the food columnist equivalent of a standing ovation.

The food. Look. I compared this place to Fazoli's, not some classy Italian joint. And that's not a fair comparison either because Noodles serves noodle dishes from many different culinary traditions, not just Italy. Noodles and Company is not trying to be the best noodles you ever had, though there's no shame in that being the case. They're just trying to scratch your noodle itch quickly and effectively. No matter if you're looking for some creamy and flavorful mac & cheese, some thick and toothy udon, or just some damn spaghetti and meatballs, that itch is going to be scratched. So fast. And so good.

First of all, do NOT miss the Korean BBQ meatballs. The sauce has such a rich, deep flavor. So deep that you might not come up for air. And it's not just the sauce; the sauce just carries you through and accompanies you on your voyage through this meaty little morsel. Wonderfully seasoned. Want to know what that flavor is that you can't quite place? That's gochujang, friends. Gochujang. It's been making some big culinary waves here in the States for a few years. Say what you will about America, we eventually come around when it comes to new ingredients. Which bodes well for most apocalyptic scenarios. Anyway, if you're sharing the meatballs with more than one other person, go ahead and get two orders.

The entrees.

Me? I got the Three-Cheese Tortelloni Rosa. Dig this: Tortelloni filled with a blend of ricotta, mozzarella, parmesan, onions, and garlic in spicy tomato cream sauce with mushrooms, roma tomato, spinach, and parmesan. It's got a little heat to it, too. Not even a kick, though. More like playing footsie. It was exactly what I wanted. I love a stuffed pasta dish. Ravioli, tortelloni, tortellini, etc. My eyes immediately start looking for it at any pasta place. Oh! Want to know the difference between tortelloni and tortellini? Tortellini is smaller. You're welcome. I said it was exactly what I wanted. Translation: Itch scratched.

My partner, Annie, ordered the BBQ Chicken Mac. Here's what: Wisconsin Mac & Cheese with grilled chicken, crispy jalapeños, and tangy barbecue sauce. When they talk about "Wisconsin Mac & Cheese," they're talking about another menu item we got for my daughter Lillian, so let me give you the skinny on that, too: A classic blend of cheddar and jack cheeses, cream, and elbow macaroni. Though BBQ chicken always has been and always will be a favorite food of mine, there are places I can't abide it. Like pizza. A BBQ chicken pizza sounds like such a good idea. I've learned that, for me, it's



THREE-CHEESE TORTELLONI ROSA



BBQ CHICKEN MAC



PESTO CAVATAPPI



KOREAN BBQ MEATBALLS

a terrible idea. But take that cheese and chicken and barbecue sauce, and all the fixins and put it on some pasta instead of a flatbread? Hell yeah. Not sure why it works, but it works. Huh. Maybe I just need to make a BBQ mac & cheese pizza.

Anyway.

Wesley, my 12-year-old, specifically requested a pesto dish. I'm such a proud father. Does YOUR pre-teen even know what pesto is, let alone order it instead of spaghetti or mac & cheese? No? That's because my son knows what's up. Who doesn't love a bright, nutty pesto, huh? Enter the Pesto Cavatappi: Cavatappi noodles (the twirly macaroni) in basil pesto cream sauce, garlic, mushrooms, tomato, and parmesan. He got chicken on it. Hell yeah. Another itch scratched.

Let me tell you about something else you might want to mess around with if your taste buds are tougher than the average Dubuquer. There's a seasoning Noodles and Company makes available to their customers called Smolder from Boulder. Not satisfied with the heat level of your food? Try this proprietary spice seasoning blend. My son has been playing around with different spices and seasonings on his food. Another thing I'm proud of. He went straight for the Smolder from Boulder, making it a spicy pesto. Want to add some heat to one of the yummy Asian-inspired dishes? Sriracha sauce is at the ready as well.

But no matter what you get, just trust me on those Korean BBQ meatballs. I've been craving them ever since we tried them. ■



Noodles and Company
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 Hours: Daily: 11 AM-10 PM

DANNY FAIRCHILD

DANNY DOESN'T TAKE CRAP FROM NOBODY, BUT HE'LL TAKE FOOD FROM ALMOST ANYBODY. IF YOU WANT TO FIGHT DANNY, OR FEED HIM NOM-NOMS, EMAIL HIM AT DINING@DUBUQUE365.COM.



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New Year's Resolution Vision Board

THURSDAY, JANUARY 11, 4 P.M.

For ages 12-18. Create a vision board to help achieve your resolutions and goals for 2024! Materials provided. Registration required. Sign up online at carnegiestout.org/events or call 563-589-4225, ext. 2228.



Dubuque Shakespeare Project: Edward III Discussion

SUNDAY, JANUARY 14, 2 P.M.

The Dubuque Shakespeare Project will focus on Shakespeare's early work in the coming months. "The Making of a Playwright" series will begin with a discussion of *Edward III*, led by Sunil Malapati at the library. This event is free and open to the public. Please join us! Learn more at <https://shakespeare.carnegiestout.org>.

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