

BURKEY'S NO PRETENSIONS, JUST GOOD FOOD

BY SUNIL MALAPATI

The neighborhood bar is as American as apple pie and every bit as iconic. You imagine a place made of wood, with a pool table or two, maybe a small stage in the corner, eclectic bric-a-brac on the walls and a friendly smile (or two). The kind of place where they serve “beer” and if you are snobby enough to want an IPA, the server will unceremoniously lead you to the glass-fronted cooler so you can pick out your frou-frou drink for yourself, and she is too kind to roll her eyes at you!

Burkey’s Bar & Grill wants to be that neighborhood bar in this southwestern corner of Dubuque that does not have too many watering holes to call its own. The Key West area should become a little busier once the Southwest Arterial opens, and Burkey’s should have established a decent foothold by then. The bar opened a few months ago and is still a work in progress, but there seems to be a regular clientele and the food menu is well thought out, indeed better than expected at most bars.

Dan and Donna Burkart are no strangers to running a bar with food. They used to run The Silver Chicken on the North End a while ago and since then, they accumulated experience in Galesboro, Darlington, and Potosi. Dan also worked for Aramark, the food service company for over



OLD HIXY SMOKEHOUSE BRISKET

two decades. Burkey’s happened almost by accident—their sons (“boys,” as Donna calls them, though they have not been boys for a while!) bought this place on Key West Drive for their flooring business and found the lower level sufficient for their needs. The upper level got transformed over the period of a year and half into a bar and restaurant. The boys spent a lot of time and energy remodeling the place. The place used to be a bar (Riggs and Budde’s) and the bones were there, it just need a fair amount of TLC. The boys also found a lot of treasures at various pawn shops and refurbished a giant Budweiser

Clydesdale poster they found. Their efforts have definitely paid off: you can now walk into a well-lit cavernous space with well-spaced restaurant and bar tables and chairs and stools. A giant fan, appropriately from Big Ass Fans, gently hovers over the giant space. There is a good-sized stage in a corner, the bar area itself is large and comfortable, and there are lots of different areas to hang out, whether just having a drink or indulging in a whole meal.

The vast experience that Dan and Donna have accumulated in the food service industry is embedded into their menu. What appears at first glance to be a typical bar menu yields delightful surprises as you dig in. First on the list is the Haystack Onion rings—homemade, it says, after a hyphen. The giant plate of crispy fried rings did not last more than a few minutes. Our group devoured them and pronounced



DANO'S SNACK BITES

them delicious and not greasy at all. The onions are soaked in milk to get some of the bite out, dredged in seasoned flour, and quickly fried. It is a great way to start the meal, though Dan cautions they are not a particularly good take-out food (steaming does hurt the crispiness). All the more reason to come to the bar where you can enjoy a cold one with the onion rings!

As good as the Haystack rings were, it did not prepare us for the transcendental Dano’s Snack bites: cut up beef tenderloin simply seasoned and then charbroiled, served with two pieces of garlic bread and perfectly complemented with a Vidalia onion dressing. The steak bites are juicy and tender with just the right amount of grill marks and could serve as a great light meal by itself. Reasonably priced for such a luxury item, these are a must-have appetizer.

The sandwiches offer quite a variety from burgers (freshly made and charbroiled), BLTs and various fried or smoked meats in between bread slices, priced between \$5 and \$10—indeed, the pricing for all items is more than reasonable, often verging on a steal for the customer! Consider the humble grilled cheese—the Burkey’s version is packed with bacon, American and Cheddar cheese before grilling and then finished with Parmesan cheese on top. One of the best grilled cheese sandwiches I have had, it is the Parmesan on top that gives it its edge. Dan said he picked this tip up when working at Performance Food Service in the Quad Cities area. Small “tricks” like this elevate many a dish.

I love a good slow-cooked brisket, and Pat’s smoked pork and smoked brisket are amazing. They are served with a local barbecue sauce from Tara Sweeney or you can get Sugar Ray’s barbecue sauce. One person at our table thought Sugar Ray’s worked best for the brisket and Tara’s for the pulled pork. I preferred Tara’s sauce for both: it did not try to fight the smoky flavor and the consistency was much better for my palate. Irrespective of which sauce we liked, we all agreed that the smoked meats were delicious!

If you are in the mood for a full dinner, there is steak, chicken, or fish with an array of side-dishes. We had the four piece fried chicken dinner and fried cod dinner. The fried chicken was dry-dredged with the crispy flour covering not too thick, the inside juicy and moist. The fried cod similarly was not greasy with the battering light and keeping the oily fish moist and flaky. It says something

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BROASTED CHICKEN



HAYSTACK ONION RINGS

about the breading technique that the home fries had more oil in them than the fried chicken or cod (not that they were greasy). The dinners come with home fries, French fries, or hash browns—we had our hash browns with cheddar cheese, an option I will never refuse! The dinners also come with soup or salad, and we had to try both! The coleslaw was creamy and chunky with crisp cabbage and onion drenched in a flavorful dressing. The beef vegetable soup was a clear highlight, with a deep flavorful broth that warmed your bones on a chilly December evening and beef and vegetables to give substance to the broth. I could drink a gallon of that broth—several of us at the table were periodically dipping our spoons into that soup even as the table became laden with a whole lot of other dishes. Dan and Donna told me that Sherri Turner is the soup master, making all of them from scratch.

In addition to good bar food in the evenings, Burkey's also serves breakfast on Saturdays and Sundays. The Saturday menu is a la carte while they have a brunch on Sundays with eggs,

sausage, bacon, ham, biscuits and gravy, pancakes, French toast sticks and syrup, cinnamon rolls and danishes (coffee included). The space has a very different feel during the day time, with sunlight streaming through the south facing door. There is also an upstairs area that is still being remodeled and potentially another area that may be converted to a dining area. The clientele is of course different during the day, less noisy and friendlier to families. Breakfast is a good time to dawdle in this space, slowly sipping coffee and relaxing. In spring and summer, there is a balcony that could prove very enticing. There are plans to expand the balcony further and that can only increase the allure!

For now, it is nice to see the Key West area get a nice neighborhood bar where a lot of care has gone into every aspect from food to service to décor. Dan and Donna talked repeatedly about wanting to be part of the community and taking care of them while they are at Burkey's. They are off to a good start and it would be interesting to see how they develop and thrive going forward. ■



BURKEY'S BAR AND GRILL
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