

HOPS & RYE

A LITTLE BIT OF EVERYTHING

BY SUNIL MALAPATI

The Downtown restaurant scene seems to be going through a boom phase with many new faces, some occupying old spaces. We do have quite a few historical buildings with lovely architectural details and it does my heart good to see them put to good use. The building on the corner of Locust and 11th Streets, kitty corner from the magnificent Carnegie-Stout Public Library, has good bones and now houses the latest restaurant to open in the Downtown area: Hops & Rye.

The co-owners, Teri and Bryan Schulz are very aware of the history that comes with the building. They almost named their new restaurant “The Abandoned Elevator” after the 11th Street Elevator that no longer exists, but once was a poor cousin to the Fenelon Place (Fourth Street)



Elevator. Instead, their kids convinced them to go with “Hops & Rye,” referencing the Speakeasy culture of the early 1900s during which the building was constructed. The Abandoned Elevator now refers to the upstairs area of the multiple level bar and restaurant. Two mannequins dressed in 1920s finery adorn the main entrance while an eclectic mix of black and white photographs grace the walls. Exposed brick, gleaming wood floors, high vaulted ceilings and narrow windows provide a warm inviting space populated with café tables and simple black chairs that remind one more of a French bistro. Additionally, there is a small patio area that is being expanded to offer more outdoor dining spaces for the warm months.

Teri and Bryan Schulz set out to first design a sports bar with a speakeasy theme: Bryan is a life-long Milwaukee Bucks fan and used to coach basketball at Hempstead. They quickly found that being on Locust one

block away from Main St. meant a different zoning law applied. They pivoted and the bar now became a bar and restaurant. They hired a chef from Maine and asked him to design a menu that would appeal to Midwesterners while serving the bar crowd. All of this development history is reflected in the eclectic menu that has a bit of everything!

Since the name is Hops & Rye, let us start with the drinks. They have six beers on tap with four craft beers and the old standbys: Bud Light and Blue Moon. The craft beers are Millstream Backroad Stout from Amana, Iowa; Elysian Space Dust from Seattle, Washington; Left Hand Stout from Colorado; and Kona Big Wave from Hawaii. There is also a good collection of bottled beers. The “Rye” shows up as several whiskey-based cocktails with speakeasy-inspired names like Cat’s Meow Manhattan and Babyface Old Fashioned. I decided to try the Blind Pig Whiskey Sour. The cocktail was competently made with fresh lemon juice cutting through the alcohol in the whiskey, the simple syrup, cherry and orange rounding out the sweet notes. The bar could be stocked with a few more rye whiskeys to capitalize on the name. Dubuque has quite a few places for craft beers and a place specializing in specialty ryes would be a wonderful addition. Bryan told me that they are working with their distributor to find new ryes to add to their offerings.

In addition to their beers and cocktails, the restaurant also offers a selection of wines to complement the food. The wines work well with the French bistro ambience of



FISH TACOS

the place and according to Teri, are quite popular with the customers.

Now, on to the food! Chef Matthew designed the menu incorporating his own strengths (apparently, they inject clam chowder into their veins in Maine!) and using Tri-State ingredients.

Teri told me an amusing story about how Matthew had never heard of cheese curds before taking on this job, but now, the white cheddar curds are featured quite prominently on the menu. Breaded lightly and served with marinara sauce, they are quite light and showcase our neighboring state well. Though they buy cheese curds, Chef Matthew insists on making most items on site.

And that brings me to the bread. Hops & Rye offers three different kinds of bread (brioche, multigrain and sourdough) for their sandwiches and burgers. The bread is made daily on site and the quality shows. I am somewhat of a bread snob, though not too much of a baker myself. A well-made brioche is a thing of wonder: soft and rich, buttery and yeasty with an unbroken crust and no crunch whatsoever. I am happy to report the brioche bun I had on two different occasions met those criteria. The sourdough bread has a wonderful tang with a crispy crust and chewy interior and makes for a wonderful casing for the burgers. Chef Matthew has his own starter for the sourdough and hopefully will continue to maintain it.

The sandwiches and burgers have a nice variety. We tried a Drunken Mushroom Burger. The beef itself had a good flavor with the mushrooms and whiskey cream sauce acting as enhancements. Too often, the burger becomes a vehicle for the additions, but here it held its own. Among the sandwiches, we tried the Philly Steak and Cheese and fried crispy chicken. The protein in both cases was well cooked remaining moist. I could have used more seasoning on the steak, but then I do prefer aggressive seasoning. The buttermilk



LINGUINE WITH JUMBO SHRIMP



CHICKEN KIEV

marinated chicken had flavor and the breading was not too heavy. The French fries on the side were not greasy.

The food menu offers soups, salads and appetizers. The Maine Lobster Bisque is offered on Fridays only and the Clam Chowder on Saturdays only. Unfortunately, my five visits did not fall on those days and I had to settle for a Beef Burgundy soup of the day on one of the visits. The soup had a hearty base with good depth of beef flavor.

Among the salads, I would definitely recommend the Thai Chicken Salad. The grilled chicken with sweet Thai chili sauce lay on a bed of napa cabbage, crunchy noodles, red peppers, red onion and cashews with a side of ginger lime dressing. The sauces both had excellent flavor and complemented each other well. I would suggest adding some greens to the napa cabbage to enhance the salad.

The appetizers list includes the aforementioned cheese curds in addition to bar standards such as wings and spinach artichoke dip. The steak bites with blue (spelled bleu in French on the menu) cheese and horseradish aioli feel luxurious for an appetizer. The standout for me was the tacos with large deep fried flour shells. You can order them with chicken, steak or fish, and I would suggest fish. The fried fish was still flaky, not greasy and complemented well with fresh lettuce and pico de gallo, jack cheddar and sour cream. The tacos make for a light meal unto itself, especially for lunch.

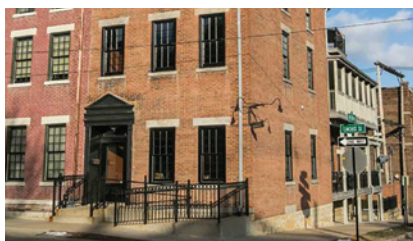
The lunch menu has only three entrées while the dinner menu features more. We tried the Chicken Kiev and Linguine with jumbo shrimp. The chicken was moist, but the melted butter did not ooze out as much as I had hoped. The linguine was well cooked with some bite to it and sauced just right—too often, the pastas are over-sauced and you do not get the taste of the pasta itself. Among

the dinner menu items, the pan fried rainbow trout with almond panko breading looked appealing.



Desserts are made on site and Chef Matthew's pastry experience is showcased well here. The Cocoa Streusel Cake is light on the cocoa flavor but brimming with the cinnamon streusel flavor. I would not mind having it for breakfast accompanied by strong coffee. The White Chocolate Brownie Pie with layers of white chocolate and brownies is served with warm chocolate ganache and is unexpectedly light. The Belgian Chocolate Mousse Cake is made with "Callebaut" chocolate from Belgium and has deep, rich cocoa notes that linger long after the last bite. I appreciate that the mousse has just enough sweetness to balance the bitter chocolate notes but not so much that you lose the complex flavors.

Hops & Rye has been open for a few weeks now. Both the Schulzes and the Chef seem to be tweaking various aspects of the bar and restaurant to fully capitalize on their strengths. Currently, they serve the lunch menu from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. and the dinner menu from 4 to 9 p.m. The bar is open until closing after midnight with the appetizer menu available after 9 p.m. They are currently planning to add brunch on Saturdays and Sundays. I have no doubt Hops & Rye will continue to evolve, and if they keep the focus on good wholesome food, they should occupy that lovely corner on Locust and 11th Streets for a long time to come. ■



HOPS & RYE

1108 LOCUST ST, DUBUQUE, IA

563-556-HOPS (4677)

HOPSANDRYEBAR.COM

Hours: Mon & Wed–Fri: 11 AM–Close;

Tue: Closed; Sat: 9 AM–Close;

Sun: 10 AM–Close

Prices: \$8–\$21

SUNIL MALAPATI

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