

Lester's Sports Bar & Grill

January 24, 2012

What does it take to make a sports bar? Many television sets, of course, all tuned to an all-sports station that features either games or loud conversations by groups of former athletes forever interrupting one another or questioning someone's manhood -- maybe both at the same time. And what about a sports bar and grill, like Lester's in the Central West End, just east of the intersection of Euclid and Maryland? Does the addition of "grill" mean better meals, or just more toasted ravioli, burgers and chicken wings?

Lester's certainly has the television sets, and a large U-shaped bar. And a dining room to the east of the bar, with plenty of television but a lower ambient noise level. And a patio and a rooftop terrace, in a neighborhood where dining and/or drinking outside is The Thing To Do, or will be when the weather warms a little. Lester's also has a key ingredient for success in St. Louis restaurants -- parking, right next door. Sadly, at least to us, the kitchen closes at 10 p.m., though it stretches to 11 on Fridays and Saturdays. We think that post-event (theatrical, musical or sporting) activities should lead with a drink and a snack, and a 10 o'clock close cuts everything too fine.

But Lester's offers a wider-ranging menu, like salads, barbecue and delicatessen sandwiches on rye bread it says is baked in house, in addition to toasted ravioli and chicken wings.

A conclusion: Yes, Lester's Sports Bar & Grill is a sports bar, and a grill, too, which seems

to draw a slightly older, more mixed audience.

Lester Miller's aim, going back to his Clayton Road digs, apparently was for a delicatessen of the style of the Stage or the Carnegie, or the Second Avenue, in New York, or maybe Canter's, in L. A., but not enough St. Louisans are up for it. The compromise comes close to working, but the sports theme obviously was a necessity.



It's easy, if you'll excuse the phrase, to chicken-out on appetizers. Chicken soup with a matzo ball was a winner, deep-flavored chicken broth with a few vegetables, some pieces of chicken and a fat, baseball-sized matzo ball in the middle. The ball was of the floater school, matzo balls traditionally being divided into floaters and sinkers, and it was light, even fluffy, and tender, a good example of that traditional dumpling. And the wings are available three ways, a dry rub, Buffalo-style or tossed with garlic, lemon and pepper. An order of dry-rubbed brought a good-sized serving of fat, juicy wings, nicely seasoned with subtle things beyond and pepper, very worthwhile.

If we want to continue the puns, we can talk about beefing up other appetizers.

Quesadillas, something we've always thought of as an adult version of a grilled cheese sandwich, work well with Lester's smoked brisket added to the cheddar and pepper jack cheeses and grilled onions. The salsa was chunky and mild, and the guacamole was inoffensive. But the brisket's contribution was significant, raising these guys to first-rate. The same brisket appears in the house chili, another mildly spiced dish, very tasty but heavy on the vegetables and chunks of tomato, and therefore a little sweet.

On the sandwich side (there are no entrees, just sandwiches and some ribs), the menu features the deli offerings, sandwiches of smoked brisket, pastrami, corned beef or smoked turkey breast. Alas, the pastrami fails, too lightly seasoned and too lean by far. Diet-friendly, perhaps, but not what many of us prefer. The pulled pork sandwich was properly smoky, and reasonably moist, if not deeply pig-flavored. The barbecue sauce was pretty mild, tomato-based and sweet.

Fat half-pound hamburgers can be topped with grilled onions, bacon or cheese for an extra dollar; ours, with the grilled onions, turned out to be close to the as-ordered rare, and very juicy, better than many of its kin in similar establishments. But the so-called award winning grilled all-beef hot dog showed exactly one grill mark, and its internal temperature reflected that lack of acquaintance with the heat source. The bun, too, was cold (unlike the hamburger's). Uninspiring.

Except for the french fries, all the sides (potato salad, slaw and baked beans) were quite sweet. The potato salad, so cold it was close to frozen, lacked zip, and so did the slaw. Beans sported a bit of meat, but lacked acidity to offset the overdose of brown sugar.

Dessert goes a couple of steps up from some of the sports-bar cliches. A chocolate layer cake, cold but moist and rich, was dark and nicely moderate in its sweetness. We'd order it again. Cheesecake keeps to the deli theme. It arrived drizzled with some sort of red berry puree, almost but not quite raspberry, and thickened to nearly a gel. The inside of the cake was the texture of cream cheese, which Joe liked and Ann didn't. Closer to the edges (and thus the heat source), it was cake-ier, less gooey and with more of the classic cheesecake texture. Overall, it was satisfactory, with its graham cracker crust, but the puree subtracted a few points.

Good service, both early in the evening and later, though we fear the noise level would be almost lethal on certain game days. But that's a sports bar.

Lester's Sports Bar & Grill

4651 Maryland Ave.

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www.lestersrestaurant.com

Credit cards: Yes

Wheelchair access: Fair

Smoking: No

Sandwiches: \$7-\$15

Joe and Ann Pollack, St. Louis' most experienced food writers, lead a tour of restaurants, wines, shops and other interesting places. When we travel, you will travel with us. When we eat, drink, cook, entertain or read, we'll share our knowledge and opinions. Come along for the ride!!

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