



DINING/WAPPINGERS FALLS

A Welcoming Place, With Welcoming Fare

By EMILY DeNITTO

WE were running late and had overshot the exit off Route 9 when we called Mojo Grill in Wappingers Falls to let the hostess know we needed even more time to get there. "No problem," she said, despite the sounds of a full restaurant in the background.

When we finally arrived — a good 45 minutes past the reservation — we were greeted with a happy "You made it!" and were immediately escorted to the only empty table in the place, held for us. No antagonism, no attitude. The open kitchen was buzzing and the staff was running, but the message was relax and enjoy.

Mojo Grill's atmosphere makes that easy to do. Ocean murals, gas chimineas and billowing multicolored fabric hanging from the high ceiling create a laid-back feel, and a duo plays soft jazz on weekends. An extensive specialty drink menu furthers the effect. The restaurant's eclectic and well-made offerings range from Cuban mojitos to Brazilian caipirinhas to eggnog chai martinis. My favorite was the house margarita,

made with premium tequila, Cointreau and a splash of lime.

The dinner menu, which changes daily, is similarly varied. Call it nouvelle American with Italian, Asian and Latin influences. One recent night the list included a tuna sashimi appetizer (nice pieces of fish with wonderfully fresh wasabi); barbecued ribs in a dry rub, Memphis style (good smoky flavor); and an Arthur Avenue sampler that featured tasty artisanal cheeses, red wine sopresatta, hot prosciutto and other imports from the Bronx.

In less enthusiastic hands, it might all come off as confusing, but Chris and Karen O'Brien, the owners, and Dave Moon, the chef, are so excited about their efforts that my guests and I were drawn right into the flow. And there were plenty of nice touches to soften us up, like the house-whipped butter that came with crusty ciabatta rolls, or the fresh horseradish that gave the prime rib au jus the extra zing it needed.

Mr. Moon is especially good at combining sweet and savory flavors. An appetizer of seared scallops wrapped in bacon and cooked in brown butter was terrific. The red

Mojo Grill

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mojogrill.net

GOOD

THE SPACE Roomy, colorful and comfortable, with an open kitchen and two chimineas. Wheelchair accessible.

THE CROWD Mostly grown-ups, couples or groups, out for a leisurely meal. The bar area draws its own crowd for music and camaraderie.

THE BAR Set off from the dining room, with gentle live music on weekends. Many specialty drinks and two wine lists: one of mainly West

Coast wines from \$20 to \$40 (and a few high-end offerings like the \$425 magnum of 2002 Paradigm Estate cabernet); another of Italian wines, predominantly in the \$30 range.

THE BILL Lunch entrees, \$9.95 to \$18; dinner entrees, \$17 to \$32. All major credit cards accepted.

WHAT WE LIKE Seared scallops with bacon in brown butter, red curry-coconut shrimp, butter-nut squash bisque, Arthur Avenue sampler; sweet-potato-crusting salmon with maple soy glaze, Asian beef tenderloin medallions, Dijon-crusting rack of lamb; banana bread pudding, cheesecake, chocolate mousse cake.

IF YOU GO Monday to Saturday, 11:45 a.m. to 10 p.m.; Sunday, noon to 9:30 p.m. Reservations are recommended for Friday and Saturday.

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Photographs by Scott Mullin for The New York Times

MELTING POT Mojo Grill offers food characterized by Italian, Latin and Asian influences, including, top, panzanella, a bread salad.

curry-coconut shrimp, also an appetizer, was a perfect mix of spicy and sweet. And an entree of Dijon-crust rack of lamb came in what tasted like a blueberry sauce, but was actually a demi-glace finished with a petite syrah.

Indeed, surprises came regularly. Sweet-potato-crust Atlantic salmon with a maple soy sauce could have been too sweet, but instead hit just the right note. Kimchi sat atop beef tenderloin medallions to great effect. And the potato croquette side was one big square — with a golden brown crust and rich, cheesy filling.

It is the more straightforward offerings that can sometimes fail. Lobster ravioli in a light tomato cream sauce barely had any lobster flavor. Grilled mahi-mahi was also tasteless, despite the mango and pineapple salsa. And a pesto rice side was completely underdone.

But there are enough good tastes at Mojo Grill to keep me coming back. Desserts, all made in-house, are consistently satisfying. Recent winners included banana bread pudding, with a crusty exterior and soft, warm center; the cheesecake, a creamy circle topped with cherries; and the chocolate mousse cake, a more formal offering with a hard chocolate crust.

And you won't feel rushed at the end of your meal. The O'Briens are big proponents of the slow food movement — buying supplies locally when they can and telling diners right on the menu to take their time, which is definitely good advice. Most of the food at Mojo Grill is worth lingering over.