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O'Donnell's Seafood Restaurant

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 Special to the News-Post

There are restaurants that create a lot of buzz — restaurants where the food cognoscenti jockey for prime tables, where funky and creative dishes are de rigueur. Then there are restaurants that seem to have been exactly as they are for decades, so much so that they're never discussed ... and they're loved (or hated) for it by multiple generations of diners.

O'Donnell's Seafood Restaurant is in the latter category.

To be fair, the restaurant has changed quite a bit over the years; it started more than 75 years ago in downtown Washington, D.C. Another location opened in Bethesda in 1956. In 1997 the restaurant opened in its current location in Gaithersburg; the other restaurants no longer exist.

The restaurant on Kentlands Boulevard is large and airy, with Cape Cod-style architecture and several dining rooms that can be closed off for private events or opened up for busy weekend nights.

Families with children are corralled in one of these rooms, containing their noise and mess to one space and allowing adult diners a modicum of peace. (As the parent of a young child who came along to dinner, I both appreciated and felt annoyed by this practice.) There is also a better children's menu than in most restaurants, with flounder and shrimp joining more typical offerings like chicken fingers. Our son loved his fried flounder, which was sparkling fresh and clad in a wispy, crisp batter. Its rapid appearance would be appreciated by any parent of a hungry child.

A basket of breads arrives shortly after we are seated. O'Donnell's is known for its rum bun, a yeasty cinnamon-laced roll with powdered sugar icing and a strong rum aroma. It's odd to eat this sort of confection before dinner, but the sweetness and the crackling frosting are appealing to children and adults alike. A corn muffin and some crusty rolls round out the bread selection, but those rum buns are justifiably beloved.

The menu hits the highlights of most seafood menus: there's a few selections from a raw bar, seafood-based soups and salads, some classic appetizers like clams casino, a few more creative seafood entrees, and many classic seafood favorites like crab cakes and fried shrimp. One highlight is a short list of seafood dishes sauteed "Norfolk-style." There are also "simply prepared" items for those who prefer their seafood without embellishment.

New England clam chowder (\$4) is one of four soups on the menu. It's acceptable but not extraordinary, with enough clams to satisfy in a broth strong on anise-like celery flavors. A soft-shell and fresh corn salad (\$15) sparkled with crisply fried crabs, plenty of fresh corn, greens and a creamy dressing.

The least successful dish we ordered was a piece of seared tuna covered with wasabi sauce and pickled ginger. The tuna was ordered and served medium-rare, but by the time it arrived at our table it was downright frigid. A sampler of seafood Norfolk-style (\$21) fared far better; a small metal dish arrived sizzling-hot, with shrimp, crab and lobster chunks drizzled with hot butter and white wine.

Real old-fashioned mashed potatoes arrived alongside, making for a Chesapeake comfort meal of the first order.

Desserts are homey and enormous. A mud pie was a big hit: a thick slab of frozen coffee mousse in pastry, capped with a generous chocolatey topping. A mango turnover was large, a little short on the filling but otherwise tasty.

O'Donnell's is the sort of restaurant that welcomes generations of families, and has over the course of its storied history. It may not dazzle with cutting-edge cuisine, but it does classic Chesapeake and East Coast seafood well, and it's sure to please conservative appetites well at a reasonable



Photo by Doug Koontz

O'Donnell's is known for its fresh seafood. Pictured is pan-seared Atlantic salmon, served over butternut squash and spinach. The salmon is topped with jumbo lump crab, green chili hollandaise and julienne fried sweet potato.

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