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Black Walnut Café: Eclectic Food with a side order of cute

By HBJ Gourmet, Special to The Houston Business Journal

In the first episode of “The Mary Tyler Moore Show,” lovably gruff TV station manager Lou Grant tells would-be employee Mary Richards “You’ve got spunk,” followed by “I hate spunk.”

That job interview came to mind whenever I thought about the Black Walnut Café, but I replaced “spunk” with “cutesiness.”

When Black Walnut opened in Rice Village three years ago, the restaurant tried way too hard to be perky. Prices without dollar signs were strung out to four places after the decimal point. The menu jumbled type faces and capital letters popped up in the middle of words. The hours of operation were equally nonconformist, beginning and ending a few minutes before or after the hour rather than on the dot.

But a few years of sneers seem to have brought the management to its senses, or mostly. The restaurant writes \$9.50 as 9.5, but the doors are now opened or locked when the minute hand is straight up, and the menu no longer looks like an eye chart. So anti-cutes can finally enjoy the Black Walnut Café’s often splendid fare with minimal wincing.

I don’t know what The Woodlands and Sugar Land spinoffs are like, but the original Rice Village location is a bit noisy although visually pleasant thanks to the namesake black walnut paneling, dark wooden tables and chairs (including several wingback jobs), a system of ceiling fans run with belts and pulleys and enough plants to outfit a nursery or fern bar.

Ordering is done at the counter, and vibrating and flashing pagers signal customers when their food is ready for pickup. But when there are too many plates to lug back to the table in one trip, a friendly staff member will lend a hand. By that time, though, you will have already paid your bill and, because of the self-serve setup, you probably didn’t leave a tip. As a result, the cashiers are both surprised and grateful when anything approaching 15 percent is tacked on upfront.

The first time I visited the Black Walnut Café, the money taker thanked me for my generosity. And when I went back for desserts (good-looking but generally so-so pastries baked in-house, with superb gelatos made in The Woodlands store) and paid cash for them, she recognized and didn’t ask whether I wanted my change back.

The Black Walnut Café’s menu is bravely eclectic. The breakfast offerings range from pancakes and eggs Benedict to quiche,

kolaches, huevos rancheros, frittatas and breakfast burritos. But I restricted my investigation to dinner and lunch items, which also run the international gamut and sometimes combine two nationalities in the same dish.

One of the starters is toasted ravioli espanol, which sounded more fun than it actually was. The tomato Pavia sauce (apparently a Black Walnut invention) that came on the side was nice and zesty, but the pasta envelopes were tough and the mild jalapeno cheese inside was mild to the point of tastelessness.

A much more successful culinary merger, if also one that retained some vestiges of cutesiness, was an order of Dooickey’s crisp southwestern egg rolls. Here, deep-fried egg rolls contained not Chinese vegetables but roasted chicken corn, black beans, bits of bell pepper and minced cilantro and jalapenos, with pico de gallo and a drizzle of sour cream as garnish. I liked them even more than the excellent, almost porridge-thick tomato basil soup spiked with cheese tortellini.

Salads make sensible meals during Houston summers, and the Black Walnut offers a wide variety of these lite entrees. First on the list is called (what else?) the Black Walnut Salad, and mine was terrific. The house greens (mostly romaine with a few more-exotic leaves) were topped with handfuls of chopped walnuts, grated Gorgonzola cheese and tiny matchsticks of unpeeled Granny Smith apples, plus thin slices of tastily seasoned grilled chicken. At first I thought there wasn’t enough tomato-based dressing (it tasted a lot like Russian), because it didn’t stick to the greens. But I made them just wet enough by swishing them around in the pool of dressing on the bottom of the bowl before putting them in my mouth.

My favorite non-salad entrée was spinach rigatoni stuffed with a mixture of cheeses, artichokes and mushrooms and served with a luscious tomato cream sauce under a scatter of sun-dried tomatoes. But there was a three way tie for second place: The Chef Larry Larson Burger on an onion roll with goat cheese, grilled mushrooms, sun-dried tomatoes, red onions and, of all things, oregano and walnuts; the Thirteen Coins sandwich piled high with peppered turkey, ham, salami and provolone and moistened with some of that tomato-y salad dressing; and exemplary pot roast cut into chunks carne guisada-style and accompanied by diced roasted red potatoes and some roasted vegetables. The Tex-Mex-style chicken lasagna was OK, but didn’t make the finals.