

GLOBE NORTH DINING OUT

Comfort and food amid rare treasures

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We had heard that Loretta, a restaurant that opened seven weeks ago in downtown Newburyport, has a dazzling collection of sports memorabilia on display. We worried it might be yet another high-decibel place for sports junkies, with beer, nachos, and a half-dozen giant TVs pummeling diners with March Madness.

Instead, we found an intimate, old-fashioned-seeming restaurant where people come mainly to eat, not watch TV. (Although there is, to be sure, a giant TV behind the bar, the hockey game underway when we arrived was on mute.)

We visited late on a quiet Monday night, about 8:30. The cozy dining room, where Aquatini used to be, was mostly empty. Brick walls were covered with framed pictures, many of them poster-sized, all of them signed. In addition to sports photos signed by Ted Williams, Jackie Robinson, and an entire World-Series-winning Red Sox team, there are also movie posters signed by Robert De Niro, Dustin Hoffman, Uma Thurman, Robert Redford, and someone with an illegible scrawl who played at Woodstock in 1969.

"We just have an incredible amount of sports, music, and movie memorabilia here," Loretta's owner, Ted Epstein, told us. The material belongs to a big-time collector friend who keeps most of his treasures in storage and is happy to have some of them displayed.

The menu at Loretta is small: just five entrées and five appetizers when we visited, plus three specials. The specials change daily, even from lunch to dinner, Epstein said. The fare is unusually low-priced. There are cafeterias on the North Shore where you could easily spend more for dinner.

An entrée of Mediterranean chicken skewers — char-broiled marinated chicken with onions and peppers and served on a huge bed of pilaf — cost only \$9. A small plate of Prince Edward Island mussels steamed in the shells was \$8. A small bowl of the soup of the day, beef stew: \$3.

Loretta is an unpretentious place, and the food isn't fancy. Epstein told us he named the place after his mother, "who was a great home cook." The restaurant's selling point is the freshness of its ingredients. The mussels were wonderfully tender and juicy. The vegetables in the Vietnamese winter rolls (\$8), Napa cabbage and carrots with mint and cilantro wrapped in rice paper and served with a peanut dipping sauce, were crunchy and refreshing. The beef stew was obviously homemade, and the meat was falling-apart tender.

A small plate of Tucumcari quesadillas (\$8) (Tucumcari is a city in New Mexico, in case you were wondering) was tortillas filled with smoked chicken, cilantro, onions, and tomatoes. It came drizzled with sour cream lightly flavored with cumin and lime juice. Epstein used to own a restaurant in Maynard that specialized in barbecued ribs. He proudly does his own smoking, not just chicken but ribs, pulled pork, and fish, and he makes his own barbecue sauce.

If you're looking for pizzazz, however — a chef who does daring things or is a master of mysterious sauces — this isn't the place. The dishes were, as a rule, a bit on the bland side. The chicken kebabs could have used more of the sweet juiciness that onions should provide. The mussel broth, described as flavored with fresh garlic and pinot grigio, might have benefited from more of both.

But the food is wholesome, and the pungent smokiness of the meats is a treat. And aside from culinary matters, where else can you dine with a signed poster over your table of wild man Dennis Hopper roaring by on his "Easy Rider" Harley?

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