

A taste of New Orleans

Decadent dishes are the specialty at Sifton-area's swanky Magnolia Tavern



Magnolia Tavern's Gulf shrimp come with a ramekin of Nolia sauce.

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By RACHEL PINSKY- for The Columbian

Magnolia Tavern sits in a Sifton strip mall alongside an H&R Block and a nail salon. Walk through the doors, however, and you're surrounded by cushy leather booths, ornate wrought-iron chandeliers and a sleek bar stacked with spirits worthy of a swanky night spot in New Orleans.

Recently I met a friend for a weekday lunch at this restaurant, which Matt Schiffman opened in November.

When my friend and I arrived around noon, the place was about half-full of people scattered between the restaurant and bar area. The host told us to sit wherever we liked, so we chose a large booth by a window. We started with pork belly burnt ends (\$12) and Gulf shrimp (\$12.50) from the snacks menu.

The burnt ends come as five generously sized chunks of pork belly smoked with cherry wood until crispy on the outside and unctuous on the inside. A sweet, smoky barbecue sauce with a lick of fire enrobed each piece. The mustard that binds the spice rub to the meat added a bit of acid and flavor.

A quartet of fist-sized Gulf shrimp then arrived with a crisp panko coating. To the side sat a ramekin of the tavern's Nolia sauce, a Cajun remoulade spiked with pickle juice. The creamy sauce with a kick of spice elevated the crispy, massive shrimp.

The wedge salad (\$14) was good, but nothing extraordinary. On future trips, I will resist the urge to get something fresh and slightly healthy in order to focus more on the decadent dishes that are Magnolia Tavern's forte.

Next came our entrees: fried chicken (two pieces for \$14, three for \$21) and Nolia gumbo (\$16). The fried chicken comes with a choice of two sides — fries, Yukon mashed potatoes, collard greens or steamed broccoli.

Our two-piece order included a breast and a drumstick. Both pieces were covered in a crispy batter and yielded tender meat.

For sides, we chose the fries and collard greens. The shoestring fries were good. The collard greens — cooked low and slow with a ham hock from Otto's Sausage in Portland — were tender but a bit crunchier than other slow-cooked greens I've tried. Even so, I liked their flavor and texture.

The Nolia gumbo came in a large, shallow bowl with a mound of tender long-grain rice in the center. Bits of chicken, andouille sausage, onions, green peppers and okra swam in the velvety, Cajun-spiced broth, flavored by a dark roux, celery, green pepper, onion and garlic.

For dessert, we ordered sweet potato pie (\$9), a luscious, creamy and somewhat healthy dessert.

Sitting down days later to write this article, the memory of those rich, crispy pork belly burnt ends bathed in a spicy-sweet barbecue sauce lingered. They're among the top five things I've eaten this year.

I plan on returning soon for another order and to sample an Old Fashioned (\$13-\$15), a Sazerac (\$14), or one of Magnolia Tavern's signature creations like The Back Porch (\$14), with peach tea-infused bourbon, Amaro Angeleno, peach tea syrup and mint.

When I spoke to Schiffman for this article, he said the kitchen was going through some transitions. He's bringing in Ken Spost to spearhead the culinary division at M1 Concepts, Schiffman's company that owns Magnolia Tavern.

Spost brings years of experience in the restaurant industry, including stints as executive chef at Napa Valley Grille in Los Angeles and chef at the Capital Grille in New York City.

I look forward to seeing how Magnolia Tavern evolves. This swanky, NOLA-inspired spot is off to a good start.

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Dining Out Guide Magnolia Tavern

Where: 8611 N.E. Ward Road, Vancouver

Hours: 11 a.m. to midnight Monday through Thursday; 11 a.m. to 1 a.m. Friday; 9 a.m. to 1 a.m. Saturday; 9 a.m. to midnight Sunday.

Contact: 503-730-5455; magnoliatavern.com

Health score: Magnolia Tavern received a score of zero on Dec. 2. Zero is a perfect score, and Clark County Public Health closes restaurants with a score of 100 or higher. For information, call 360-397-8428.