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Roy's maintains its status as a Sand Lake tradition worth revisiting

Sentinel Staff

Roy's was one of the first to take up residence on Restaurant Row. In fact, in early 2001, there were so few dining establishments open on Sand Lake Road that we hadn't started calling it Restaurant Row.

Timpano was serving, but many others that now line that stretch of highway -- and many that have come and gone -- wouldn't start serving until later that year or the next.

So, back then, Roy's was hot. It was new, it was splashy, it was sexy. And it was different, coming out of Hawaii with a fusion cuisine influenced by Asian ingredients and European techniques, a style created by Roy Yamaguchi, who opened his first Roy's in Honolulu in 1988. It didn't seem to matter that by the time Roy's had crossed the Pacific and the continental United States, it had become a chain owned by Florida-based Outback Steakhouse Inc. The crowds flocked.

They're still flocking. On my two recent visits, Roy's was bustling as if it was still the new kid in town. Actually, the new kid in town is Ryan Leto, the chef and managing partner at the Sand Lake Road restaurant. Leto took over for Greg Richie, who opened the restaurant. Richie's contract expired this year, and he opted to move on. Leto moved to the Orlando shop from the Las Vegas Roy's.

The chef/managing partners are given a certain leeway to make changes to the menu, although some items are constant and can be found at any of the 33 Roy's restaurants. These dishes, "Roy's classics," were among the best things I sampled on my recent visits.

One was the surfah combo (\$26), which combined a macadamia nut-crusted mahi mahi with a serving of seared golden sea bass. The mahi mahi was the better of the two, a beautiful fillet, thick and moist, served with a rich lobster butter sauce. The seabass, a little hard-crusted, was paired with a truffled herb pistou, which, my server volunteered without being asked, means pesto.

I also liked the chive-seared U-10 sea scallops (\$26), sufficiently large, as the U-10 designation would suggest (10 per pound), but soft and buttery with a velvety texture. The scallops were well-complemented with a Thai chili vinaigrette, but the wedge of fried tofu was rather superfluous and looked silly on the plate.

The prosciutto-wrapped ono (\$26), also known as wahoo -- and caught, the menu wants you to know, on a long line -- was dry and disappointing. But not as much as the garlic honey-mustard grilled short ribs of beef (\$23). Instead of the richness of fat, the short ribs were tough and chewy. Longer, slower cooking might have saved them.

Appetizers were largely satisfying. I especially liked the crispy garlic calamari (\$7), which weren't all that crispy but had jackets of delicious batter, and were served with Roma tomatoes and spicy chilies.

Roy's canoe appetizer for two (\$26; paddles extra) offered a sampling of coconut shrimp sticks, spring rolls, ravioli and tortellini with a few mushy edamame thrown in. The shrimp sticks were good, as were the spring rolls, stuffed with chicken, and the beef tortellini.

Lemongrass-seared tiger prawn pad Thai (\$8) had large shrimp served with noodles tossed with a curry sauce and peanuts. The firm and fresh-tasting prawns were the rightful stars of the dish.

Pineapple upside-down cake (\$7.50) was the standout dessert by a long shot. The cake was moist and sweet with a wonderful toasty note, and the fruit added just the right bit of tartness. A macadamia nut tart (\$7.50) paled next to the pineapple.

Staff are well-trained, almost to a fault. You will probably never have the opportunity to open the front door yourself -- one of the hostesses will likely leap ahead to do that for you. Servers have excellent menu knowledge (see pistou/pesto above) but insist on walking diners through the menu. On one visit, my guests and I had decided what we wanted for our appetizers before our server came to greet us. He started into his spiel and, seeing no end to it soon, I stopped him and gave him our appetizer order. As he walked away, he turned and said, "They make us go through the whole thing." The guest should have the right to make them stop.

Roy's is unapologetically noisy, whether you sit at the counter overlooking the open kitchen, as I did on one visit, or in the dining room. Get your important conversation out of the way before you get there.

The dining room is nicely decorated with walls of smooth black stones accented by moody lighting. But the kitchen noise and lighting overwhelm, keeping this from being a romantic destination.

Roy's has a great sense of community, and unlike many other restaurants near the tourist area -- and with a name that will draw them in -- this restaurant caters to the local trade.

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