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Topics: |||||

Columnists: |||||

Published: May 16, 2008 12:00 AM

Modified: May 16, 2008 05:44 AM

Steakhouse makes choices simple

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No doubt about it, these are exciting times to be a foodie in the Triangle. As our dining options continue to get more varied and sophisticated, living here is an exhilarating ride on an ever-lengthening gourmet gravy train. Shall we dine in the pan-Asian car tonight or the tapas car? Or perhaps that new molecular gastronomy car everyone is talking about?

Sometimes, though, after a hard day at work, it can actually feel as if we have too many choices. The last thing you're in the mood for, after making decisions all day, is still more complex decision-making about what you're going to eat for dinner.

Enter Clayton Steakhouse, which sits among the charming restored shops that line Main Street in downtown Clayton. Step inside, and feel yourself relax as you soak in the soothing earth tones and understated furnishings of the dining room. Let the vintage black-and-white photos, framed and neatly hung on camel walls, carry you back to simpler times. Unwind with a drink at the cozy bar. Nothing fancy, just a bourbon on the rocks or a glass of wine from an unpretentious but thoughtfully chosen list.

You'll relax a little more when it comes time to order appetizers and you realize that you won't have to fret over whether to order the crab cakes or the shrimp cocktail. That's because there are no appetizers. In fact, there are only four entree options: steak, chicken breast, pork chop or salmon. All are flame-broiled, and all served with baked potato, Texas toast and a salad bar. Make that five options if you count the vegetarian alternative: a baked potato loaded with steamed broccoli, sautéed mushrooms, cheese sauce, chives, cheddar cheese and -- if you're not a stickler about the vegetarian part -- bacon. It doesn't get much simpler than that. Your only decision to make, other than which entree you want, is how you'd like it cooked.

But don't mistake simplicity for mediocrity. The salad bar is modest by modern mega-bar standards, but its bins are always well-stocked and the produce fresh. Most of the dressings are homemade, including my favorite, a creamy blue cheese. The potato is properly baked, not steamed in aluminum foil. And that's real butter (and a little grated Parmesan) on the Texas toast.

Top billing on the entree list at Clayton Steakhouse, not surprisingly, goes to the steak, an Angus beef rib-eye hand-cut to your specification in two-ounce increments from eight ounces (\$18.95) to 18 ounces (\$28.95). OK, I suppose that's another decision you have to make. But it's a no-brainer, really, given that thicker cuts better show off a steak's essential beefiness, and that leftovers make a killer steak sandwich. And you don't really have to make a decision about how you'd like your steak cooked, either, do you? You've surely developed a preference long ago. Just be advised that when

they say rare here, they mean a true rare with a cool red center.

Not in the mood for steak? No problem. The alternatives -- a hefty bone-in pork chop, a French cut (with first wing joint attached) chicken breast, and an 8-ounce fillet of Norwegian salmon -- are anything but a letdown, as they too often are at steakhouses. In fact, the juicy, rosy-centered pork chop would give the steak a good run for its money.

There's just one more decision you'll have to make, a decision about dessert. Not whether to have one, mind you, but which one. Betsy Grannis, who owns the restaurant with her husband, Michael (the couple also own the nearby Morning Glory Inn), bakes all the desserts from scratch. Her repertoire includes a score of old-fashioned cakes and flaky-crustured pies, but on a given night, the offering might include lemon chess pie, chocolate-covered cherry cake, peach cobbler and blueberry cream pie. A tough decision, granted, but at least you know you can't go wrong.

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