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White River Fish Market takes to grilled mania hook, line and sinker

White River Fish Market, a Tulsa culinary treasure for more than 50 years, built its reputation on fried preparations of seafood and fish.

For years, life just didn't get much better than to sit down at White River for a plate of fried catfish, shrimp or perch. The fish could be paired with fried hush puppies and fried onion rings -- or maybe coleslaw, gumbo or red beans-and-rice. For dessert, it had to be sweet potato pie or buttermilk pie.

All of that still is there, and those dishes still are life-affirming treats for those of us undaunted by some of today's dining trends. (Hey, I'll have a green salad and yogurt tomorrow night and call it even.)

Nonetheless, as yummy as the fried dishes are, it was a couple of grilled entrees that caught our attention on a recent weeknight.

Tuna steak (\$13.95) and halibut fillet (\$13.45) both were extraordinary, cooked through but still moist and flaky with clean, fresh flavors. These two will create some tough decisions on future visits.

We went on a Tuesday night because one in our party likes to take advantage of the lobster dinners (\$19.95) offered only on Tuesdays and Wednesdays.

The lobsters have ranged from remarkably tender to a bit chewy, but they always are big and flavorful, the equal to many we have had at two to three times the money.

Drawn butter, cocktail sauce and tartar sauce are available upon request.

The fried seafood platter (\$11.95) included two shrimp, two scallops, a stuffed crab and catfish fillet. The shrimp, thin but as big around as hockey pucks, and the catfish were outstanding.

Some don't like the consistency of scallops, but I do, and these had a light batter and were fried perfectly. Still, I suspect the broiled version was superior. The crab was average.

A fried shrimp dinner (\$10.45) includes five jumbo shrimp. A huge mound of smaller bites can be had on the popcorn shrimp (\$9.95) dinner.

A catfish-and-shrimp dinner (\$9.95) is one of the most popular combinations. Diners also may choose among such options as orange roughy, rainbow trout, clams, sea bass, salmon and red snapper, most of them available fried, broiled or grilled.

Have you noticed how tilapia has popped up on menus all over town? White River has served it for years. Owner Gary Cozby ships the sweet, white fish from Costa Rica and offers them whole or filleted, fried or broiled.

Cozby also purchased a Cookshack smoker from a Ponca City firm a couple of years ago and has added smoked salmon (\$13.45) and smoked trout (\$12.45) to the menu.

All entrees come with two round hush puppies and a choice of two side dishes. Among these, I loved the thick, homemade onion rings and the meaty pinto beans best.

Almost as good were the coleslaw, baked potato and spiced rice. The thin potato salad was my least favorite, both in taste and consistency.

Each bite of the creamy sweet potato pie and buttermilk pie (each \$2.25 a slice) is to be savored. The cheesecake is not made here, but the one White River serves is a good one, with an almost dry texture and pleasant flavor. Ours was topped with a cherry sauce.

Ice water is served automatically in plastic tumblers. Beer is served in plastic cups as well, in line with the no-frills ambience of the restaurant.

The most notable decorations are a quilt made by Cozby's mother, done some 20 years ago that features the **White River Fish Market** logo, anchors and fish in the colorful squares; and one of the Tulsa Zoo Friends penquins, this one with a "Gone Fishin' " motif created by artist Eileen Bryce.

Diners order at the glass counter featuring fresh fish at the north end of the restaurant, then sort of point toward where they might land at one of the booths or long tables; the servers will find you.

Servers bring stainless forks and knives wrapped in a paper napkin along with your order. Louisiana hot sauce, ketchup and Tabasco are on the tables.

Booth cushions are a moss green, and most of the tabletops are a caramel-colored laminate. Chairs are a mixture of wood and black metal. The long front window looks out on Sheridan Road.

The long display case at the south end of the room is the retail fish market part of the operation. Take-home market items are too numerous to mention but may include trout, tilapia, catfish, catfish nuggets, sea bass, halibut, mahi-mahi, shrimp, crab legs, smoked herring, salt mackerel fillets and buffalo fish. There also is seasoned cornmeal, sauces and White River's own brand of Cajun-style gumbo seasoning salt.

White River also operates a popular booth each year at the Tulsa State Fair, on the upper level of the Exposition Building.

WHITE RIVER FISH MARKET

1708 N. Sheridan Road 835-1910

Food:Seafood/Fish

Price:entrees, \$8.45 (stuffed crab) to \$13.95 (swordfish steak)

Smoking policy:No smoking

Credit cards: All major

Hours: 10:30 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 10:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. Friday-Saturday

Food* * *atmosphere * 1/2service* *

(Ratings reflect the quality of the food, setting and service. One is fair, two good, three very good and four excellent.)

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