

New Times Grill is bringing burgers back

Mike Roberts

pensacolaeyeonart@yahoo.com

Times Grill, a budding Louisiana restaurant chain, opened in Pensacola last month with a quiet bang. Located on Nine Mile Road across from Carmike Cinemas, it has drawn a considerable throng with its slick façade bearing the boast, "World Famous Hamburgers."

"We don't consider ourselves a Cajun restaurant but it has a Cajun influence," said franchisee Linver Leffel. "We want to be known for our hamburgers."

Times Grill originally opened in Mandeville, La., just across Lake Ponchartrain from New Orleans, in 1994. Its founder, Shearn Lemoine, opened another location in Slidell and two more in Baton Rouge. Leffel and Lemoine teamed up 2 years ago through a mutual acquaintance.

Leffel and his wife Nicci chose Times Grill for its menu's give-them-what-they-want gravitas.

"Have you tried the food yet," he laughed when I asked him why he chose to bet on an unfamiliar brand.

With Times Grill, the attention is on the classic American burger. The restaurant, managed by Richard Foster, is comparable to a compacted TGIFridays, but without the affected revelry.

The "World Famous Hamburgers" are hand patted on site and come in a number of guises. The basic grilled Times Burger (\$6.99) is a half-pound patty and arrives with fries or a scoop of chunky red potato salad peppered with scallions. The Big Times Burger (\$7.50) is just as basic, but weighs in at 1 1/2 lb. Times Two with Cheese (\$9.49) is a double burger with two 1/2 lb. patties mortared with a choice of two cheeses. Finally, the Wall of Fame Burger (\$16.99) is so big that if you clean the plate, your picture goes up on the wall.

Besides size, the burger list is also preoccupied with what goes on them. The Buster Burger (\$6.99) has a whole wheat bun with a side of sweet potato fries. The Cajun Sunset (\$7.49) is dressed with a fried egg and Cajun spices, while the Cordon Moo (\$7.49) includes ham and marinara sauce. For vegans, the Garden Bella (\$7.99) comes with a grilled portabella steak.

What clicks with Times Grill is that its attention to detail goes well beyond the burgers. Appetizers like Chorizo con Queso (\$6.99) or a sausage dip paired with fried strips of wheat tortilla and the potato salad make a strong first impression. The creamy crawfish soup (\$3.99 cup, \$5.99 bowl) has a hearty kick thanks to its thick pepper jack broth.

Alternatives include sandwiches, wraps, and salads. Entrees such as fried seafood and the crawfish and shrimp fettuccini point to the kitchen's elasticity.

Fred and Mary Sievers, celebrating their 35th wedding anniversary, couldn't finish their onion slab, a hand-sized hunk of thick cut onion rings.

"I'm not big on Southern food," Mary said somewhat discreetly. "But the menu isn't all about the fried food. I like the variety."

Mary is a local marketer and found the restaurant inviting for small lunch meetings. Fred noted that the acoustics and privacy also were a bonus.

For those who leave room for dessert, a good bet is the Bananas Foster Bread Pudding (\$4.99), which pits a mound of pudding with sliced bananas and vanilla ice cream. There's also a creamy style Times Cheesecake along with old-fashioned shakes and floats.