

Still perfect after all these years

By Bill Cory

TELEGRAM & GAZETTE REVIEWER

What a fine refuge on a cold January night. O'Connor's seems to look a little different on every visit, but it's always a warm and cheery destination. Himself (Brendan) and Herself (Claire) have been providing the ambience of a small pub, even while expanding from 75 seats to 350 since we discovered our favorite Irish oasis 18 years ago. What was a burned out sports bar when the O'Connors found it, quickly became a destination pub under their care. We've heard that dining out in Ireland isn't really special. We assume that's because Brendan and Claire brought with them Ireland's best tuned taste buds; their Chef Bob Bouchard never misses a beat.

Though we've watched fields and rocks turned into additional parking as the pub has grown, we were still lucky to find a parking space at 7:30 on a recent Friday evening. The wait inside was minimal, though, because our friends had called ahead to be included on the waiting list. O'Connor's also welcomes reservations for lunch and dinner. Reservations on weekend evenings are for groups of six or more. While we waited, there was just enough time to look over the newly built entry.

The only delays in service were ours, as we tried to choose from an expanded menu. In an attempt to overcome our family addiction to Brendan's Irish Potato pizza, we chose shillelagh sticks and the new rock shrimp, crab, asparagus and cheese bake, each \$6.99. Shillelagh sticks are real "gray" corned beef rolled in dough and baked. An order of six sticks comes with a terrific mustard dip. The flavor of the authentic corned beef is a delight, and the soft, doughy texture of the freshly baked sticks a treat; now for another dip of that terrific mustard sauce. New to the menu is the generous bowl of rock shrimp, crabmeat, asparagus and cheese, served fresh from a quick finish

O'Connor's Restaurant and Bar

1160 West Boylston St., Worcester
www.oconnorsrestaurant.com

★★★★

Hours: Sunday closed except March 11th, Mother's Day and some of December, 11:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. Mondays, 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. Tuesdays through Thursdays, 11:30 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays
Phone: (508) 853-0789
Parking: Private lot
Handicapped access: Good
Credit Cards: Visa, MasterCard, Discover, Diner's Club, American Express
Prices: Moderate; entrées \$9.99 to \$19.99
Phases: A big, reasonably priced menu, reliably original and excellent food, real Irish hospitality. Nobody does it better.
Minuses: None

in the oven. Sticks of ciabatta bread are sliced for the dipping. Room for improvement? Not on your tintype.

Fresh, warm brown rolls and butter are a little different at O'Connor's, with lots of flavor. Most dinners come with your choice of soup or the house salad. We both had the salad, a good mix of greens with home made croutons, cucumbers, grape tomatoes, bits of red cabbage and carrots with house balsamic dressing. Pretty healthy stuff; it builds up both you and your conscience to handle the dinner and dessert ahead.

Somehow, O'Connor's manages to keep the menu fresh without dropping old favorites. Much of the menu's 40-plus choices, and some specials, date back to the first menu in the late 1980s. Now, really ... where else would you look for a beef, mushroom and Guinness pie, a marlin steak, lamb kebobs, the perfect chicken Francais, trout, grouper or authentic traditional gray corned beef and cabbage? Rely on finding plenty of chicken and seafood options, meats, a mix of traditional Irish specialties and inspired new entrees. Most entrées are priced on the low side of \$10 to \$20. We

counted 21 at 13 or less, including corned beef, nine chicken dishes, baked schrod, turkey pie, pork chops, shepherd's pie and crab and shrimp cakes.

The Soup Goddess chose lamb stew for \$13.99, cooked up with vegetables, potatoes and barley, then finished with parsley and thyme. Very much her kind of dinner; she left not a bit. Something new on the menu caught my eye, Indira O'Brien's chicken curry, \$12.99. Another sort of stew — the kind I can't resist, plenty of white chicken meat in curry sauce made with chopped tomatoes, onion and mango and peach chutney, topped with yogurt, almonds, raisins and coconut over rice pilaf. Just enough heat, with a fine mix of flavors. You either like curry or you don't, and I really do.

We somehow resisted O'Connor's awesome bread pudding in search of ... whatever, with fine coffee. Crème brûlée cheesecake, \$4.99, sounded good, with its scorched caramel top and whipped cream. Excellent, lighter than I expected, and a good choice. My selection was the apple, peach and cranberry crumble with oatmeal (healthy!) brown sugar, nutmeg (bah) and cinnamon (hurray!) with vanilla ice cream. A fine mix, with plenty of flavors and crunch at the bottom, to boot, \$4.75. Both excellent desserts, but ... if you've haven't tried O'Connor's Irish bread and raisin pudding, served hot with butterscotch sauce, vanilla ice cream and whipped cream, for a mere \$4.50, you've denied yourself for far too long.

It was a wonderful meal as always at O'Connor's. All of this splendid dining for two cost \$54, plus beverages, tax and gratuity. Table service by Mary Hippert was cheerful, prompt and charming. Dinner was reliably fine and filling as it has always been. It's remarkable that a restaurant which has quintupled in size over 18 years, hasn't slipped a notch in quality, service, originality and hospitality. And it looks better than ever. We've visited pubs on only two continents so far, but our favorite is right here in Worcester.