



TASTE & TELLM. Eve Elzenga Maine Sunday Telegram Sunday October 25, 1998

Food: ***

Service: *** 1/2

Atmosphere: ***

Hours: open at 7 a.m. daily; closing times vary by season from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m.

Credit cards: yes

Price range: \$5.95 to \$14.95 for entrees

Reservations: no

Vegetarian selections: yes

Smoking: no

Bar: no, but wine and beer available

Wheelchair access: yes

The bottom line: Home-cooked food served in a landmark Maine diner.

Wells – Route 1 is a treasure trove of restaurants and shops. Some have become revered institutions. One of the best known and loved is The Maine Diner.

Socrates “Louie” Toton opened The Maine Diner in 1953 to locals during the off-season. He used the place as a getaway from his Boston restaurant, City Hall Lunch. For 30 years, Toton spent his summers tending a garden out in back of the diner.

The current owners, Myles and Dick Henry, still maintain that garden, and the restaurant is open year-round. Now, with more than 1,000 people a day stopping by during the summer - 1531 is their record – diners get to eat the fresh produce straight from that garden.

But don't think that the Maine Diner is just for tourists. Its laid-back atmosphere and simple, hearty cooking are a draw for natives who enjoy the food and camaraderie.

The 70 seats – at booths, counters and stools occupying two rooms – are filled any time of year. The exterior and interior of the building are painted a crisp blue and white motif. Natty blue and white-striped awnings shade the windows. Even the menus and placemats match the color scheme. Inside, the walls are decorated with framed fan letters and old menus, awards, Maine scenes, maps and past restaurant reviews.

One of the things that's most apparent at the diner is how well the staff works together. I came away not only appreciating our fantastic waitress but admiring the kind way the staff talk to, and help, one another. It was nice to hear the cook singing out the waitpersons names and adding a “please” to let them know their orders were ready to serve. Maintaining this level of civility is a major feat to achieve in such a small space, with so many people to serve, in such a short time.

The food is just what I expected. All the comforting old standbys are there. Breakfast is served all day, every day. Offerings run the gamut from lobster benedict with red bliss homefries (\$9.95), to one egg with toast and jelly (\$1.75). And there is everything in between – homemade biscuits (85 cents), hot Italian sausage (\$1.95) and baked beans (\$1.95).

The regular menu is broken up into categories: Soups and appetizers (\$1.50 to \$7.95), salads (\$1.95 to \$11.95), diner food (\$4.25 to \$8.95), seafood dinners (\$8.95 to \$14.95), and dinners from the Maine land – beef, pork, turkey, ham – (\$7.95 to \$14.95). There are also 34 different sandwiches available all the time (\$3.50 to \$14.95). And there are daily specials.

I began with the soup of the day, beef barley (\$1.50 cup/\$2.75 bowl). Big chunks of beef, along with carrots, peas and barley were combined into a thick soup that was attractive and tasty, though quite salty.

My companion's Maine crab cakes (\$3.95) included crab, red and green pepper, tarter sauce, Worcestershire sauce and saltines. The breading was thick. The result was a cake that was pasty on the inside and heavy on the outside. It was a disappointing version of a Maine favorite.

Other appetizers include onion rings (\$3.95), she-crap soup with sherry (\$2.25 cup/\$3.95 bowl), and homemade chili (\$1.75 cup).

We tried the tossed garden salad (\$1.95). Made from leaf lettuce, green pepper, onion, tomatoes and cucumbers, it was fresh and attractive. I especially enjoyed the low cal, homemade Zinfandel vinaigrette. Other salads include lobster (\$11.95), marinated steak (\$6.95), and tuna (\$5.95).

Choosing an entrée was a challenge. The diner is renowned for lobster pie and lobster rolls. But I decided to see how a heart-healthy dish would fare, since several appear on the menu. I ordered the haddock dinner, baked without butter or crumbs. The generous portion of fish arrived in a ramekin sprinkled with paprika and parsley. It was not dried out and was very good.

My plate came with a baked potato, sour cream and butter, and a broccoli and cauliflower medley in cheese sauce. While great tasting, it was not heart-healthy. I discovered that plain vegetables could be substituted for these meals.

My companion ordered the chicken pot pie (\$8.95). An enormous ramekin was filled with white chicken meat, mixed vegetables and a mild sauce nicely spiced, topped with a pastry crust and baked teaming hot. The dish was comforting and satisfying. Served with it was a giant helping of real mashed potatoes and cranberry sauce. This plate could have feed two to three people.

Other entrees include homemade macaroni and cheese, chili or baked beans with a choice of grilled franks, Kielbasa or a hamburger patty and served with coleslaw and a corn muffin (\$5.95 each), center-cut ham (\$8.95), roast turkey (\$8.95), baked stuffed shrimp (\$12.95) or sole (\$10.95) and pulled barbecued pork platter (\$7.95).

Desserts are traditional and homemade. We sampled the apple crisp (\$2.75). Fresh apple slices were heaped into a parfait glass with topping swirled though.. It was heated and crowned with a delicious rich vanilla ice cream. This was a real treat.

We also tried the chocolate cake with a sinful peanut butter icing (\$2.75). The cake was deep and dark chocolate and icing was over the top.

Other selections include red raspberry or blueberry pie (\$2.50), Grapenut custard pudding (\$1.95) and bread pudding (\$1.95).

Our bill before tax, tips and drinks was \$33.00.

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