

Modern twist on comfort food

Duke's Alehouse taps local growers to produce eclectic palate pleasers

By Laura Bianchi

Contributing Writer

The linen-topped tables, covered with butcher paper from recycled material, say a lot about the philosophy at Duke's Alehouse & Kitchen in Crystal Lake.

Formerly Duke O'Brien's, the new concept debuted in August following a makeover of food and interior.

The fresh vibe is smart and refined but casual, with a green conscience and a chef/general manager putting his culinary degree and upscale experience to good use.

Original brick walls and vintage pine floors, refinished to a mirror-like gleam, are recycled features. They bring aged

small stage features live music and comedy nights Thursdays through Saturdays.

An outdoor patio and private dining rooms are available.

The beer menu has expanded from 30 to 50 craft brews, most made locally.

The list is well organized and descriptive, so you can pair your brew with your food.

Chef and general manager is Zak Dolezal, 27, son of owner Mark Dolezal, who also owns Durty Nellie's in Palatine.

The younger Dolezal brings French and Asian influences to an eclectic, American comfort

food menu. Trained at Kendall College in Chicago, he has worked with highly regarded chefs such as Michael Maddox at Le Titi de Paris in Arlington Heights and Shawn McLain at seafood-centric Spring in Wicker Park.

Reflecting the community's affection for farmers

markets, Dolezal buys locally grown and raised ingredients as much as possible, some organic, others certified naturally grown.

"Most of our products don't travel as far, so it is better for the environment, the economy

and your palate," Dolezal says.

I venture to add that the menu might surprise you.

Among the nine appetizers are organic tempura green beans, fried in beer batter and served with teriyaki-ginger dipping sauce. Bar-classic chicken wings are from all-natural birds, battered, fried and tossed in Thai chile dipping sauce.

We took a chance on risotto fritters and found a multiethnic winner. Properly

cooked risotto with wild mushrooms and Parmesan is rolled into large balls, coated with rye bread crumbs and fried dark brown. The crunchy crust crackles into the creamy, chewy rice.

Cucumber yogurt sauce with a whisper of wasabi adds a Greek-Asian accent to an Italian dish that works.

Grilled flatbread pizzas can be shared as a starter or coveted as an entree. The house-made dough is kneaded with fresh herbs, and, for the margherita option, topped with fresh mozzarella, feta, garlic and seasonal tomatoes. We loved the crisp edges and the play of mild and sharp between the cheeses.

Entrees and sandwiches come with sides, but the beet salad is worth adding to the table. This one is more complex than most. Aside from roasted, local beets there are



PHOTOS BY JOHN STARKS/jstarks@dailyherald.com
Seared salmon with roasted beets and potatoes at Duke's Alehouse.

Tamworths are a heritage breed originally from Scotland. Dolezal buys his from a farm in Walworth, Wis.

The pork is slow-cooked to fall-apart tenderness and doused with a house-made barbecue sauce that needs more zing.

Entrees cover the field from a

seasonal vegetarian option to roasted chicken, meat-loaf, shortribs, baked mac and cheese, and salmon platter.

The latter is basic, but well-prepared. Norwegian salmon is seared in a cast-iron skillet, served with tender roasted potatoes, fennel and beets tossed with lemon and herb vinaigrette.

All three desserts are made in-house. Two warm, chocolate chunk cookies are made for dunking in a small vanilla milkshake; bitter stout and bittersweet dark chocolate make a complex pair in creme brulee capped with a fragile crust of caramelized sugar.

We left the build-a-cupcake option for younger diners. They come with choice of frosting and toppings.

Service is small-town friendly and efficient. Owner Mark Dolezal visited all the tables when we were there, chatting and looking for feedback about the new approach.

So far, so good.

Duke's Alehouse & Kitchen

110 N. Main St., Crystal Lake, (815) 356-9980, thedukeabides.com



Beet salad is made from locally grown ingredients at Duke's Alehouse.

warmth to this cozy, early 20th-century building.

The tin ceiling in the lounge has been restored and the bar replaced with solid oak. In the dining room contemporary pendulum lights are suspended along a banquette; a

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starter side, samosas run a bit smaller than the pyramidal pastries you might see on Devon Avenue, but these crisp turnovers hold a pleasant, fresh-tasting filling of lightly spiced potatoes and green peas. Peppery, green cilantro chutney and sweet-tart tamarind chutney come alongside. The Spicy Bites puffs, a bit more Westernized, feature planks of puff pastry stuffed with your choice of vegetables, egg or chicken.

Other options include pani puri, semolina shells filled with diced potatoes, chickpeas and herbs, and mirchi pakora, stuffed and battered,

Cuisine: Indian snacks, wraps

Setting: Cute storefront in a strip mall on Route 60, east of Butterfield Road

Price range: Appetizers \$2 to \$5; entrees \$4 to \$9; desserts \$2 to \$7

Hours: 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday; 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Sunday

Accepts: Major credit cards

Also: Free parking, weekend brunch

deep-fried chilies.

"Big bites" include idli, dense, disk-shaped dumplings

made from rice and lentils, rather akin to matzo balls, served with a pleasantly piquant vegetable-lentil soup called sambhar, and biryani, a zesty, deep-orange-colored dish of basmati rice cooked with herbs and spices and topped with your choice of chicken or succulent if somewhat bony "mutton" (actually goat). Spicy Bites' biryani perhaps lacks the complexity of some versions, but still packs plenty of savory flavor.

Kathi rolls originated, according to the menu, at Nizam's restaurant in Kolkata. The story goes the restaurant once ran out of clean plates one day and wrapped its kebabs in bread instead. Spicy Bites' menu

claims the kathi rolls come on your choice of naan, a yeasted flatbread, or pancake-like fried paratha, though we weren't asked our preference and received the latter, apparently the traditional wrap.

For fillings, you can choose from spicy potato and greens, paneer and vegetables, tandoori lamb, chicken tikka or chicken achari tikka, chunks of white meat given a tangy marinade, and rolled up with chopped onions and tomatoes. The chicken edged on dryness; however, the accompanying yogurt sauce saved it. The hefty sandwich makes a substantial lunch.

Kheer, Indian-style rice pudding, and kulfi, ice cream,

are among the desserts, but the cases full of mithai, little confections, are irresistible, ranging from crunchy rawa puffs, empanada-shaped pastries with a sweet, nut filling, to candy-sweet gajar ka halwa, a kind of fudge made from grated carrots.

Drinks include Indian sodas such as Thumbs Up, a not-quite-cola, and Limca, which tastes like lemon Pledge mixed with soda water; masala tea and Indian coffee; and tart, fruity mango lassi, a yogurt shake.

If you're in the neighborhood, Spicy Bites makes a fun change of pace from routine fast-food at only a slightly higher price.