

NEW HAMPSHIRE UNION LEADER



The Union Leader has three teams of reviewers checking out restaurants around the state. They grade on a scale of 100 points, typically in five categories.

Mombo
66 Marcy St.
Portsmouth, NH
603-433-2340
www.momborestaurant.com

Open: Tuesday – Saturday, 5 p.m. to close.

Cuisine: New American.

Pricing: Starters, soups and salads, \$10-\$16; entrees, \$20-\$38, desserts, vary.

The scores for Mombo

Atmosphere: 18/20

Menu: 18/20

Food: 19/20

Service: 19/20

Value: 17/20

TOTAL: 91/100

June 21, 2016

Mombo moves to the top of our list

When summer settles in, we find ourselves spending a lot of time on the Seacoast. Trouble is, we aren't the only ones who have this bright idea.

On a recent visit to Portsmouth, we went with a few restaurants in mind that we wanted to try. However, with parking at a premium in the heart of downtown, and with a strong sea breeze conspiring to keep us from dining on one of the decks, we had to change our plan.

I had heard about Mombo from our friends, and I knew it had its own parking lot, so we ventured over to historic Strawberry Banke. Away from the hustle and bustle of downtown, we found what should be at the top of your list of must-go-to dining destinations.

Mombo was built in the mid-20th century, but the building was designed to blend into the historic area. (It was originally Strawberry Banke's Dunaway General Store, which Lady Bird Johnson dedicated in 1967.) Exposed beams, wide plank wood floors and furniture of the period make you feel as if you are dining in a home from the 1700s.

You have your choice of sitting at a table downstairs in the main dining room or at the bar. When Mombo is busy, they also open up the upstairs loft. We opted to sit downstairs and were seated in the far end of the restaurant away from the bar, so it couldn't have been any quieter or cozier.

Not only is the décor warm, so is the overall atmosphere and staff; we definitely felt welcome. Our server took the time to point out a few dishes on the menu that she would recommend and answered all our questions about the restaurant without rushing off.

The menu runs the gamut from duck to seafood, steak to vegetarian dishes. They also have a number of gluten-

free dishes available. We were impressed by the range of options and the creative preparations. Our server told us they change their menu often and had recently revamped it for the summer.

While we were enticed by some of the lighter starters like Chilled Cucumber Soup and Beet Salad, The Dining Companion and I couldn't pass up the Spinach & Artichoke Sticks (\$10) and The Four Porks (\$16).

The Spinach & Artichoke Sticks are billed as crispy spinach-artichoke dipping sticks served with a spicy pepper sauce. They've basically taken your favorite party dip and found a way to bread it and fry it. We loved that the sticks were very crispy and not at all greasy, and that the filling was a hot, gooey mix of vegetables and cheese. The sticks paired well with the spicy sauce, which balanced the richness of the starter.

As good as the sticks were, a silence descended upon the table after we dove into The Four Porks — four tasting portions of yes, you guessed it, pork. The dish includes pork belly placed atop apple compote, crispy guanciale (pork cheeks), molasses-glazed spare ribs and house made spicy chorizo sausage, served on a wood plank.

With the exception of the spare ribs, which were a bit too sweet for my taste, we had to flip coins and play rock, paper, scissors for the rights to the last bite of each of the tender pork dishes. Neither of us had ever tried guanciale, but we both came away big fans of the one thing we think may be better than bacon. Hands down, this was one of the best starters we've eaten during the many years we've been reviewing.

The meal was off to a tasty start, so we eagerly anticipated each of our entrees. I ordered the 12-ounce New York Strip Steak (\$36), a boneless strip steak rubbed with Mombo's own spice mix, grilled and topped with herb butter. It is served with lobster and shrimp raviolis on a bed of brown butter sweet corn succotash, finished with a corn jus.

The steak was perfectly seasoned and perfectly cooked to a medium-rare. Usually when I order a steak, the sides take a back seat, but the sweet corn succotash rivaled the steak for my attention. If vegetables always tasted this good, I would eat more of them. The four raviolis were also a nice addition, but seemed extraneous given everything else on the plate.

TDC ordered the Pad Thai Tuna (\$29), rice noodles stir fried with pad Thai sauce and tossed with a sauteed vegetables and topped with sesame crusted yellow fin tuna and spicy peanuts. The tuna was cooked to the medium that TDC prefers, and was the star of the dish. In fact, I am not a fan of tuna, but after much insistence I tried some of his, and was pleasantly surprised. The sesame crust added a nice nutty note to the fresh tuna. The highlights of the dish included the healthy kick of spice and different textures courtesy of the nuts and vegetables. TDC said the dish was close to perfect, but the sauce, and there was a bit too much, was heavy on the soy, which took over your palate at times.

After eating almost all of our first two courses, fitting in dessert was going to be an effort, but we were up to the task. When we were seated, we were told that the bread we started our meal with, along with all the desserts, were made in-house, so we couldn't pass on it.

TDC opted for a plate of house made chocolates (\$14). The plate was so beautiful, it looked almost too good to eat. Almost. In a flash, the chocolates disappeared. I chose the S'mores Cheesecake (\$10). I expected a slab of cheesecake topped with some graham cracker crumbs, marshmallow and chocolate sauce. What I got was an artistic masterpiece — a delicately assembled dish comprising a small piece of cheesecake topped by a small piece of chocolate mousse, with bruleed marshmallow, graham cracker crumbs, and dark chocolate sauce served on the side.

After finishing dinner, TDC and I agreed that this meal was right up there with some of the best we've eaten over the past four-plus years of reviewing. The service, atmosphere and food were top-notch. And we didn't have to wrestle for parking and enjoyed a quiet meal.

We would be remiss if we didn't mention that our three courses for two, minus a few glasses of wine, tip and tax, totaled \$115. So while it is one of the best meals we've had, it is also one of the more expensive ones we've had. But in this case, we certainly got our money's worth.

If you are trying to impress your date, or are looking for a place to have a special-occasion dinner, Mombo is the place. And if you want to try it out, but need to save a few dollars, we strongly recommend that you go for a few starters. –

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