



Willy Parkers, Not Just for the Locals

By JOANNE STARKEY

IF you haven't eaten at [Willy Parkers American Bar and Grill](#) in the last four months, you haven't eaten at Willy Parkers. A new chef came on board in August, bringing with him an upgraded menu.

The first Willy Parkers opened on Hillside Avenue in Williston Park about three years ago. It lasted a year and a half and was then closed for about six months. In the summer of 2010, two brothers, Louis and Rino Di Maria, bought the place and reopened it.

In a telephone conversation with Rino Di Maria after my visits, I asked why they had kept the name of a failed restaurant. "Because the neighborhood embraced it," he replied. That name comes from the term for a local resident. "Everyone in Williston Park is a Willy Parker," Rino Di Maria said.

The new chef, Eric Engvaldsen, had been a sous chef at [Bouley](#) and at [Jean Georges](#) in Manhattan. The food from his kitchen at Willy Parkers is not haute cuisine, but comfort food done well.

Willy Parkers is not a fancy place. Rino Di Maria said he and his brother had put their money into the food, not on the walls. Still, though the décor is simple, it's pleasant, with wainscoted walls dotted with vintage photographs of Williston Park. Tables are wood, with paper placemats and cloth napkins. There are two long, narrow dining rooms, one used mainly for parties. The bar is separate from the dining rooms.

Every night, one of the owners is in the dining room and stops at every table; that might be one reason the service is good. Once, as we sat with dessert menus in front of us, an owner came by and said, "I'll send your server right over." He was true to his word.

A favorite opener was the French onion soup, which looked like the standard offering but had a rich depth of flavor. We also raved about two salads: a huge, fresh Caesar and a generous Cobb, containing iceberg lettuce, chopped tomatoes, blue cheese, a hard-cooked egg and thick nubs of bacon, similar in taste to pancetta, in a vinaigrette dressing.

Another satisfying opener was the pot of steamed mussels, served with a choice of sauces. The delicious broth was irresistible for dunking with the house-made focaccia served at the beginning of the meal.

The crab cake, on the other hand, was an also-ran. Though we liked the corn relish and rémoulade sauce on the plate, the cake was not lump crab and contained too much filler.

All the appetizers mentioned above are included as choices on the \$24 three-course prix fixe menu offered Monday through Thursday.

A winner not on that list was a chicken taco soup, a special one night. It was spicy, chock full of vegetables and meat, and crowned with tortilla chips and a mound of guacamole.

We loved the Willy Parker burger, a cooked-to-order, juicy beauty topped with onion rings and horseradish. The fries were impressive, too.

A 10-ounce rib-eye steak special, a buy at \$24, was flavorful; the accompanying creamed spinach was delicious, but the potato pancake was forgettable. Other specials that delivered were a tender pork shank with basil mashed potatoes and spinach; and flaky black cod in a briny broth dotted with potatoes, leeks and carrots.

Among the pastas, the linguine with jumbo shrimp, sea scallops, asparagus and garlic in a lush white wine sauce was worth noting. A hefty portion of rigatoni also made the grade, with a peppery, chunky Bolognese sauce.

Desserts are all house-made. The best were a fudgy brownie sundae with ice cream, chocolate syrup and chocolate sprinkles, and an outstanding individual cheesecake with whipped cream and fresh berries. Willy Parkers is a boon for all those Willy Parkers living in Williston Park and a destination restaurant for the rest of us.

Willy Parkers American Bar and Grill

71 Hillside Avenue

Williston Park

(516) 750-8125

willyparkers.com

WORTH IT

THE SPACE Triple storefront consisting of two dining rooms and the bar. Restrooms are not wheelchair accessible.

THE CROWD Casual couples and groups, including families with children. Servers are accommodating and usually attentive.

THE BAR Onyx-topped bar, in a separate room with about a dozen high tables and 12 televisions. (The dining room has four more TVs, with the sound off.) List of 15 wines by the bottle (\$24 to \$28), and five specials for \$15 a bottle and 14 by the glass (\$6 or \$7). Two dozen craft beers on tap.

THE BILL Lunch entrees, \$8 to \$14. Dinner entrees, \$10 to \$32 (surf and turf), with most in the teens. A \$24 three-course prix fixe meal is offered Monday through Thursday. American Express, MasterCard, Visa and Discover are accepted.

WHAT WE LIKED French onion soup, chicken taco soup, Cobb salad, Caesar salad, mussels, Willy Parker burger, black cod in broth, rib-eye steak, pork shank, linguine with shrimp and scallops, rigatoni Bolognese, cheesecake, brownie sundae.

IF YOU GO Dining room hours are Sunday through Thursday from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m., and Friday and Saturday from 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. A limited menu is served in the bar until midnight Sunday through Thursday, and until 2 a.m. on Friday and Saturday. Reservations are recommended.

RATINGS Don't Miss, Worth It, O.K., Don't Bother.