

Industrial Revolution Salutes America's Greatness

The theme carries over to the eatery's menu, utensils and interior decor

BY MARK TAYLOR, POST-TRIBUNE CORRESPONDENT,

Valparaiso was a Potawatomi Indian village when the first industrial revolution occurred and was hosting a small Methodist college when the second one happened. But now a new restaurant by that name is trying to make up for lost time.

If you go

WHAT: Industrial Revolution Eatery & Grille
WHERE: 1084 Linwood Ave., in Valparaiso just off U.S. 30.
HOURS: Open from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Thursday, from 11 a.m. to midnight Friday and Saturday, and from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sunday.
PRICE RANGE: \$-\$\$\$
TELEPHONE: 465-1801

Industrial Revolution Eatery & Grille is an impressive-looking brick facility featuring metal sculpture, I-beams and steel girders. It is a theme-based restaurant that its Schererville owner, Mike Leeson, hopes will become an upscale franchise.

Its theme is "Saluting America's Greatness," and that conceit pervades its menu, utensils and interior décor. Locating it in the heart of the nation's industrial corridor is inspired thinking. Its menu opens with the legend, "Nothing beats a great meal after a long day's work."

The entrance is worth a pause to admire the Sergio Furnari sculpture inspired by the iconic 1932 photograph of 11 ironworkers taking a lunch break on an I-beam high above New York City's Rockefeller Center. Inside, framed wall photos of welders and shipbuilders show Americans at work.

We appreciated the little touches, like one television running Charlie Chaplin's "Modern Times" while another played documentaries about the relentless optimism and boundless ingenuity and determination of American inventors and entrepreneurs, highlighting three-wheeled and amphibious cars and "Jetsons"-style jet packs from an era when it seemed anything was possible.

My wife appreciated the "I Love Lucy" episodes running in the ladies' room, while I enjoyed highlights of "The Three Stooges" looping in the men's room, demonstrating that men are from Mars and women from Venus.

A model train runs constantly overhead, above the bar and restaurant. Even the salt and pepper shakers are appealing. They resemble small, geometrically shaped stainless steel sculptures. But I can vouch that they do work. There is great attention to detail here, from the burnt sienna napkins, hammered silverware and earthen-colored plates.

And the food's pretty good, too.

From an appetizers menu that included onion widgeons, brickoven wings and iron tenders, we chose the stuffed portabella and Orville's crusted tuna, an inspired choice given that we ate there on the day of Valparaiso's Popcorn Festival,

an homage to popcorn king Orville Redenbacher. The ahi tuna crusted with barbecue popcorn spices and served medium rare with a green citrus sauce was a very tasty opener.

When our server brought the stuffed portabella, I thought someone had made a mistake. It looked like a small ice cream sundae -- a thing of beauty, but a dessert. We soon realized what we took for ice cream was a creamy herb borsin cheese and the syrup topping a balsamic reduction. It was a beautiful presentation and another fine appetizer.

For her entrée my wife ordered the shrimp diablo, which included a generous serving of pan-seared shrimp served in a citrus-infused tomato sauce. While the sauce was flavorful, it was not as piquant as my wife would have liked. But the shrimp tasted fresh and were perfectly cooked, not rubbery or mushy. The shrimp were accompanied by rice, spicy garlic and roasted red peppers in an adobo sauce.

I chose one of my favorite dishes from my youth. Mom's double-shift pot roast was reminiscent of something my own mother used to make. This humble cut of beef was slow-cooked for hours and so tender I could have traded my knife for an extra napkin. It was served with mashed potatoes but had been cooked with roasted root vegetables, including potatoes, carrots, celery and onions. I'm pretty tough on restaurants claiming their dishes are "just like Mom's."

They seldom are. But Industrial Revolution's pot roast came pretty close to replicating the one my mom prepared. The only difference is I didn't have

to dodge my four brothers' fast forks when I dug in for seconds. This was a really satisfying dish that took me back to enjoy nostalgia I could put in my belly.

For dessert we tried both the red, white and blue cheesecake and the oatmeal cake. While the cheesecake was appropriately velvety and pretty to look at, the raspberry and blueberry fillings comprising the red and blue were blandly indistinguishable. The oatmeal cake offered interesting texture and flavor, a cream-cheese frosting and filling that was tasty but not spectacular.

Though Industrial Revolution does not offer full bar service, it does feature a wide selection of domestic, micro brewed and international beers on tap or by the bottle in regular and tall sizes from \$2.50 to \$9. The wine list is respectable and reasonably priced, offering mostly American vintages and some good values. By-the-glass selections range from \$5 to \$8, and by-the-bottle choices cost between \$20 and \$53.

Prices at Industrial Revolution, which seats 180, are slightly lower than area fine-dining restaurants, with appetizers ranging from \$5 for the molten cheese dip to \$10 for our Orville's crusted tuna or calamari. Soups include the liberty chili for \$6, salads from \$5 to \$9 and sandwiches and burgers from \$5 to \$10. IR originals include Baja perch tacos at \$12, Mom's double-shift pot roast at \$14 and the steelworker rib eye for \$26. My wife's shrimp diablo or the grilled salmon are \$16 each.

Brick-oven pizza and pasta dishes range from \$8 to \$16, while desserts are \$6.