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Restaurant review

Hot Olives good fit for new location

By Heather McPherson

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Hot Olives, a popular and upscale-casual eatery, has long been more weather-challenged than other restaurants in Winter Park — half of its Hannibal Square location was a covered patio.

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Two months ago, the operation packed up and moved into the old Ole Ole spot at Fairbanks and New York avenues. Hot Olives is a good fit for the building, which has been no stranger to restaurants. In the '80s, the Pink Peacock, followed by the Sunset Grill, started the parade of eateries in this space.

The large dining room in Hot Olives is broken up into sections around a large full bar in the center of the room. There are patio umbrellas open over some inside tables. The umbrellas don't detract from the flow of the room, but they simply aren't needed. That said, tables are nicely spaced, giving diners a feeling of privacy even in an expansive room.

The new space maintains the upscale-casual feel Hot Olives had in Hannibal Square. The menu appears to be largely the same.

You have to start with the signature hot olives (\$9) appetizer, a mash of diced black olives mixed with Asiago cheese, then breaded and deep-fried. From the new kitchen, the small bites seemed to have more cheese than before and they hardly needed the mild, melted blue cheese with a sweet red chili sauce swirled on top.

There were a trio of starter standouts. The beef thumbbits (\$13) were cooked a perfect medium rare and served on baked crostinis with a Kosher dill pickle. The fried green tomato Napoleon (\$12) was plated in a horizontal presentation and was generously topped with sweet lump crab, a little spicy marinara and a creamy remoulade. And the rich sushi-grade ahi tuna crisps (\$14) surrounded a fresh seaweed salad.

On two occasions at the former location, the kitchen had difficulty with the pear and brie pork tenderloin (\$21). The new kitchen has worked out the kinks. The meat was evenly cooked to juicy medium, and the candied Bartlett pears and buttery soft cheese provided a sweet-tangy complement.

The Key West blackened grouper (\$28) was expertly cooked but the rice it sat on needed a few more minutes in the steamer or saucepan. Just about every bite had uncooked grains amid the fluffy table-ready rice.

The same menu is served all day, and there are lunch specials. For midday fuel stops, the crab cake sandwich (\$12) with a key lime remoulade is a treat. The cake has a nice balance of shellfish and filler and the citrus dressing adds a nice punch.

The Hannibal Square burger (\$12) appears to be an ordinary sandwich, but the chipotle mayonnaise gives it a pleasantly subtle kick.

Desserts are not made in-house. But the chocolate peanut butter pie (\$6) is worth a few laps around nearby Rollins College campus. The large wedge rose from a dark chocolate cookie crust, building with a layers of peanut butter mousse and chocolate mousse. A smooth layer of decadent chocolate ganache capped off the presentation.

Service was gracious and efficient on both visits.

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The Dish on dining

Hot Olives

★ ★ ★

Where: 601 S. New York Ave., Winter Park (at Fairbanks Avenue)

When: 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 11 a.m.-11 p.m. Friday and Saturday

How much: Dinner entrees \$17-\$27, salads \$9-\$15, lunch sandwiches \$10-\$14

Beverages: Full bar

Wines by the glass: From \$7

Extras: Outdoor dining, available for private parties and dining

Noise level: Moderate buzz

Attire: Casual to business casual

Credit: American Express, Visa, MasterCard and Discover (prepaid debit gift cards from these companies are not accepted)

Call: 407-629-1030

Online: hotolives.com

Dining on a budget

Plenty of hearty salads (\$9-\$16) and soups (\$5-\$14) are on the menu.

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