

Diner

Digesting the Year

Several pleasant recollections of dining in 2002

Although they spend lots of time checking out the area's many new and interesting dining establishments for *CityBeat* readers, our restaurant writers have favorites of their own — some based on meals, some on the company they kept. Here are four glimpses into some of their fond memories from 2002.

Claddagh Irish Pub

A meal at Claddagh is nearly always memorable, though perhaps not for the reasons you'd expect. Yes, the barkeep will draw your "pint of plain" in the time-honored manner of the old sod;

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the Guinness is tapped using the two-part pour method to assure a perfect head. And yes, the fish-and-chips here are the real deal, a heaping platter of cod fillets coated in a Bass Ale batter served with a dry cabbage slaw (no sugar, no mayo as in its American cousin, cole slaw).

But what distinguishes Claddagh — comfortably nestled on the riverbank at Newport on the Levee — from its Celtic brethren in town is the speed of service.

At the Dubliner, Nicholson's, Crooked Nail Pub, Jack Quinn's and Pub at Rookwood Mews, you'll find equally tempting pub fare, but don't look for a fast meal. "Erin go slow," is the motto of most leisurely taverns. Whenever we stroll in Claddagh, however, be it for a Bushmill's and a pound of steamed black mussels or a pint and a half order of Fish & Chips (\$8.95 for the half; don't even attempt the full order by yourself), we're in, we're out in 45 minutes.

The pub defers to the American palate with its hearty Shepherd's Pie — it's ground beef, not ground lamb, slopped amid the savory melee of potatoes, peas, onion and gravy — but the serving remains delicious and massive, stretching to three meals easily (making its \$10.95 price tag easier to swallow). And we'd return again and again for the Full Irish Breakfast (\$8.95), two Scotch eggs with rasher bacon.

The pub is replete with nooks and crannies, isolated booths and book-lined dining areas. The boisterous central stone room is noisier, but cheerful nonetheless. And the outdoor patio has a wonderful view across to Cincinnati.

The central downside at Claddagh Irish Pub is also the upside: The plates are heaping and enormous, bigger than the petite tables. Plenty of food to go around, just precious little space left on your table for a fork, napkin or 20-ounce pint.



PHOTO: DAVID WASINGER

Newport's Claddagh is distinguished from its Irish brethren by its speed of service.

No room for a pint? A tragic state of affairs, indeed. — FELIX WINTERNITZ

The National Exemplar

One of my favorite meals of 2002 was with my brother and his two teen-age sons, age 17 and 13, at Mariemont's National Exemplar. We sat in the corner where we could survey the room, which was packed and noisy. My older nephew told his brother, "I think it's safe to say you're the youngest person here." There's always a preponderance of gray hair in that place.

The best part of going to dinner with my family is listening to their comments about what's going on around them. At one point my brother whispered about the retreating waiter, "It looks like somebody just kissed that guy. Like he had lipstick on his mouth." (The waiter, kissed or unknissed, was great. Exemplar service is always exemplary.)

The younger of the boys joked about ordering the "petite fill-eet," but ended up getting the regular filet mignon. The older, who's economy-conscious, got pork loin and mentally calculated the price of each bite. "I reckon this bite here costs about 75 cents," he'd say ruminatively, skewering a luscious-looking morsel on his fork. We also discussed wine: My brother got a dry Chardonnay, and the boys wanted to know what "dry" wine meant. When we told them, they looked skeptical.

When it came time for dessert, the younger boy, who's adventurous about food, chose the heretofore alien mousse, which he ended up loving. My brother and his other son shared cheesecake, son insisting that Dad eat the slice's

"point," the tenderest bite.

An adolescent contretemps erupted as we left. It's been my experience that you don't spend more than an hour with teen-age brothers without some kind of argument.

I enjoy restaurants most when I can experience my nephews' curiosity about and wry reactions to them. They're stern but good-natured commentators. Their evaluations, while irreverent, are frequently gracious and always hilarious. They've been refreshing people to be around since babyhood, and although they've become strapping young men now, *that* quality about them — at least — hasn't changed.

— SIAN GIBBY

Aralia

One of my fondest dining memories from this year is one of the simplest. A childhood friend pulled into town on a rainy afternoon, and we decided to lunch at her favorite area restaurant, Aralia, recently relocated to Loveland from its former downtown location.

Similar to Indian, Aralia's Sri Lankan cuisine is exotic, with rich curries, but a lighter, island flair. There are lots of vegetarian options and some fusion twists. Sauces are flavorful without turning your taste buds (or stomach) upside down. And ingredients are fresh and never overcooked — my most frequent complaint about Indian food.

On our visit, owner and chef, Triset de Fonseka, seated us, took our order, retreated to the kitchen to prepare the food and reemerged

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