

Good-time fare

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Publication Date : April 23, 2008

Much of the menu at **Good Time Charlie's** Café and Bar echoes what you'd find at any number of mid-level chain restaurants -- burgers, chili, a couple of steaks, a few salads, some sandwiches, nachos and beer.

But don't confuse the quality of the food at **Good Time Charlie's** with cookie-cutter chain fare. **Just about everything we sampled on a pair of recent visits was fresh and had been made by hand.** Nothing had been precooked at some anonymous warehouse, frozen and shipped out with the boil-in-bag instructions on the packaging.

The steamed zucchini was fresh, had a slight crunch and a delicate layer of butter on top. The fried zucchini was prepared with an equally deft hand, with the crunchy exterior giving way to a zucchini round that melted on your tongue. Both were a surprise to me, because zucchini is one of those vegetables to which I'm fairly indifferent.

The same **good** feeling swept over much of two meals, whether we were dining on grilled chicken breast with cilantro and garlic, a great choice for those who want to avoid added fat in their meals, or a meaty old-fashioned cheeseburger.

The chicken-fried steak was a revelation. In fact, it has little competition in a city that prides itself on this dish. The difference here is that the beef was tender, the batter crisp and the two worked together without separating. On top of it all, the cream gravy didn't taste like raw flour from some package mix; in fact, it tasted as if some chicken stock or base had been stirred in to give it a richer flavor.

That same gravy was served with the grilled pork loin slices, which the menu says is "just the way you like them." Only they weren't. This dish was the big mistake on two visits, because the meat wasn't grilled; it was cooked in oil, which is a big difference for those looking to avoid added fat in their food.

Better choices were the crispy fried shrimp, the griddled bacon cheese franks on a hamburger bun and the hamburger steak, ground chuck that was crowned with a silky Monterey Jack cheese sauce. The hearty Texas-style chili planted a big smile on our faces.

No place in San Antonio that purports to serve home cooking can afford to ignore the Tex-Mex influence. The kitchen goes beyond the requisite nachos to include plump chicken enchiladas that did not skimp on the meat. The aromatic pair were pure comfort.

Like most everything else on the menu, desserts are made in-house. The Texas sheet cake and the pecan pie are both served warm, with ice cream melting into the top. But for my money, the real treat is the Banana Split Pie, a treat I remember from church dinners stretching far in the past; this version betrays none of my fond memories, and I loved the way the crushed pineapple, whipped cream and butter/graham cracker crust, not to mention the bananas, complement each other.

It was obvious from the first bite why lines of people wait to be seated almost every day during lunch. It was also the reason why our servers were crazy busy. They wanted to get that food out as quickly and as hot as possible. But that left no **time** for questions, and it also led to a couple of mistakes. One tightly wound waitress couldn't be bothered with us, and that left us somewhat aggravated when we didn't get what we ordered, including that so-called grilled pork loin; the other server was easygoing and thanked us when we followed her lead and made no big deal about the mistakes.

Good Time Charlie's has served San Antonio for almost 30 years. The dining area looks a little worn with **time**, but the food shows no sign of age.

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GOOD TIME CHARLIE'S café AND BAR * 2922 Broadway, (210) 828-5392 (NC)

Hit: The chili is the real deal: thick, chunky, meaty and not a bean in sight.

Miss: The grilled pork loin special was actually cooked in oil, a big difference for those who are trying to avoid excess oil. Noteworthy: You can get a bucket of brews for \$11.95 with domestic beers or \$15.95 for imports.

Price range: Bacon Cheese Franks, \$6.25; Garlic-Cilantro Chicken, \$7.95; Fried Shrimp, \$15.25; Chocolate Cake, \$2.95 (a la mode, \$3.95)

Lunch/dinner: Daily

www.gtcsatx.com

Report card:

Food: * * * (three stars)

Service: * * (two stars)

Ambience: * * (two stars)

Rating key:

* * * * (four stars) Excellent

* * * (three stars) Very **Good** *

* * (two stars) Average

* (one star) Poor

Express-News dining critics pay for all meals and strive for anonymity.