

MORE THAN CHIPS AND SALSA: Latin influences fatten mainstream American cookery.

TUESDAY IN THE FREE PRESS FOOD SECTION.

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AT LOCAL RESTAURANTS,
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RESTAURANTS

JOHN COWLEY & SONS IRISH TAVERN

★★
out of 4 stars

Rebuilt restaurant has two personalities

By KATHLEEN O'GORMAN
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Farmington is a long way from Tipperary, and this is a long way from Cowley's Old Village Inn, the shot-in-a-beer joint that the new John Cowley & Sons Irish Tavern replaces. The original had the patina of a well-broken-in neighborhood watering hole. Demolished and rebuilt from the ground up — with the addition of a second story — it has taken on airs.

Downstairs, there's casual fine dining, or maybe "finer" is a better word. (Finer than what came before and finer than what's upstairs, but not as fine as it could be.) There are white linens, a

wine list (plus a cozy nook of a wine bar) and more menu choices, including a 14-ounce filet mignon that's \$32.95. That's a pretty fine price, too.

The pub has moved upstairs, where the menu, furnishings and prices are lighter as well. Up there, you'll find soups and sandwiches, a handful of entrees, a gorgeous custom bar, several very large TV screens, the stage and the dance floor. Smoking is allowed only on this level, and, perhaps to take the edge off those hefty steak prices down below, beer prices went up just 50 cents.

These two worlds are kept apart largely because the kitchen shuts down on weekends when the entertainers start up. The downstairs room then becomes an overflow area.

This is an ambitious and risky experiment. The Cowley family — original owners John and Marie (both Irish immigrants) and their sons Greg, Michael and Patrick — have bet the farm, so to speak, on an upgrade they no doubt hope won't send the regulars grouching off into the night. They also want to lure new business to a downtown still light-years away from centers of frivolity (and foot traffic) like Ann Arbor and Royal Oak.

A small fortune was spent on the tavern's interior, which was done by the Dublin firm Sonas Design & Architecture. Wood, lighting, doors, ironwork and trim were created and shipped from Ireland, under the Cowley family's watchful supervision, says general manager Michael Howell. The results are lovely, if a tad ecclesiastical. (Some elements are from a centuries-old church.)

Small touches, like the perky low stools, are typical of what you see in Ireland. Need an extra seat? Just scoop one up.

Executive chef David Rycey's menu tries hard to give the impression that it, too, has old country roots, but at its core, it's standard American fare.

Howell says the objective was to feature dishes reflecting Ireland's famous farms and fisheries. Try to look past the silly names given the dishes and the minor missteps, such as misspellings or references to "champs" (champ, singular, is an Irish dish of mashed potatoes with scallions).

The old Cowley's was known for burgers and steaks. You'd do well to stick to that genre, from the half-pound burger at \$6.50 to those pricey steaks (\$18.95 to \$32.95). We were quite pleased with the ribeye (\$28.95) and strip steaks (\$22.95), each served with a scoop of champ and crisp-tender pea pods and peppers. The manly portions — 20 ounces and 14 ounces, respectively — were juicy and tinged with smoky mesquite flavor from the grill.

The grilled lamb chops — a thinner, more ladylike choice — were equally successful. They were served over lentils, a nice surprise. The half-chicken, cooked, like everything else, on the wood-fired grill, was delightful — moist, smoky and pleasantly herbed.

The grilled Atlantic salmon, on the other hand, was a yawn and the Pacific



ASIA HAMILTON/Detroit Free Press

TOP: The staircase splits the space into an ambitious restaurant downstairs and a pub with frequent live entertainment upstairs.

ABOVE: The Dinn Ri salad of Asian vegetables, spicy shrimp and maple-infused pork is served over crispy chow mein noodles instead of greens.

snapper was overcooked and not helped by a murky-tasting fruit salsa. On one of three visits, our waiter touted a salad called Dinn Ri, described as "cutting edge." We decided "spooning edge" might have been more apropos, for one really needed a spoon to manage it. The marinated vegetables, spicy shrimp and maple-flavored pork were served over crisp chow mein noodles, not lettuce.

We also weren't fond of the spinach fettuccine with shrimp, fish, chicken, pork and that old Irish favorite, andouille sausage. It was awash in chili oil.

Just a few weeks after the mid-March opening, Cowley's is still making adjustments, shaking itself out. Service ran the gamut, from the overly attentive downstairs waiter who made us

want to dive under the table as he repeatedly zeroed in, to the rushed upstairs waitress who did her duty but not one iota more. Another vexing thing is that, with so many hard surfaces — granite, concrete, brick, iron — the place is incredibly noisy.

On balance, though, this Irish upstairs-downstairs experiment intrigues us. Already, it's spawning memories. One evening, cajoled into singing, a man got up from the bar and belted out "O Sole Mio." It wasn't exactly "Whiskey in the Jar," but it was precisely what you'd expect in a real Irish pub.

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JOHN COWLEY & SONS IRISH TAVERN

★★
out of 4 stars
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FARE: It's more American than Irish, except for the authentic soda bread. Downstairs, steaks, lamb chops and wood-fire-roasted chicken shine. Upstairs in the pub, sandwiches include the original Cowley's half-pound burger. The compact wine list has just a few by the glass, at \$5.50 to \$11. Full bar. Guinness and more on tap.

ATMOSPHERE: The Dublin-designed interior isn't a kitschy rendition of an Irish pub, but a modern Celtic-themed design. Downstairs, a cozy bar is tucked in the back, walled off from the rest of the tall-ceilinged room.

SERVICE: With a little Irish luck, it'll be friendly and fast.

PRICE: \$\$-\$\$\$; all major credit cards.

HOURS: 11 a.m.-2 a.m. daily; kitchen closes at 10 p.m. On Fridays and Saturdays, a \$5 cover is charged upstairs starting at 8:30 p.m. and food orders stop there. Live entertainment begins at 8:30 p.m. Monday-Thursday and 10 p.m. Friday-Saturday. Irish music alternates with rock on weekends.

NOTE: No smoking downstairs. Take the stairs or elevator to get upstairs. Complimentary valet parking offered daily from the alley behind the tavern, off Farmington Road. Public parking is nearby.