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Home / Entertainment / Dining Out /

Argenta well served by Cregeen's pub grub

BY JENNIFER CHRISTMAN

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LITTLE ROCK — The anchor of Argenta, convivially cozy Cregeen's has been open since fall of 2007. It seems like much longer.

Which is not to say that central Arkansas' only Irish pub is commonplace, so much as comfortable. The dark watering hole, restaurant and live music venue - which started as prefabricated pieces shipped from Dublin and now stands adorned with countless Jameson and Guinness signs - feels like it's always nested there on the corner of North Little Rock's Main and Broadway streets.

The a.m.-to-p.m.-to-a.m.-again menu is as casual as the sometimes clamorous surroundings in the seat-yourself space of tall wood tables with stools, regular tables and chairs, some bench and shorter stool seating and a few more secluded nooks. Also casual are the prices; most items are priced below \$10, with the most expensive at \$14.95.

There are a good number of "Irish Starters," like Irish Nachos, potato crisps topped with diced corned beef, Havarti cheese, spicy sauerkraut and sour cream (\$7.75), and "Irish Favorites," from Bangers and Mash (\$7.95) to Guinness Beef Stew (\$9.95).

But the bulk of the menu is basic American: starters like Buffalo wings (\$7.75 for 10, \$14.95 for 20) and mozzarella sticks (\$7.95); sandwiches like a burger (\$7.75, 25 cents extra for cheese) and club (\$8.95); entrees like Chicken Fried Chicken (\$8.95) and grilled salmon (\$14.95), and salads like the not particularly Irish "Irish Cobb" of grilled chicken, egg, bacon, bleu cheese, avocado, onion, tomato and romaine (\$8.95).

Figuring all American fried appetizers taste the same (chicken tenders are chicken tenders), we tried an Irish fried starter - the Irish Boxy Farthing (\$5.75) on our first visit, about the happy hour on a recent Friday night. The six petite garlicky potato pancakes served with sour cream continued our streak of never meeting a fried potato we didn't like.

If we were expecting the metallic tang of canned Clam Chowder (\$3.25 cup, \$4.75 bowl), our taste buds were delighted by the clean flavor of the lightly creamy soup chock-full of chewy shellfish, potato and smoky bacon.

For entrees we selected two requisite pub staples: Fish and Chips (\$8.95) and Shepherd's Pie (\$7.95).

In the dim dining room, the serving of Harp beer battered cod resembled a sweet potato. Inside the fried coating that had a slight bite from the beer was mild and fairly moist white fish; tartar sauce and a bottle of malt vinegar boosted the flavor. The "chips" were addictive fried potato wedges; coleslaw rounded out the fattening trifecta.

A hulking dish of Shepherd's Pie (\$7.95) - ground sirloin and vegetables (mostly carrots and peas) blanketed by mashed potatoes - was definitely a hearty entree. Although also hearty was a suffocating herb presence. We did think it was charming that Cregeen's serves the heavy entree with a decent mixed salad on the side.

Our next visit was on one of the busiest days of Cregeen's year - the Saturday prior to St. Patrick's Day, which included a daytime parade and a nighttime party with live music at the pub. When we were greeted with a \$5 cover charge (that included plastic green Guinness necklaces) and an abbreviated menu, we braced ourselves for disappointing dining.

Instead we were impressed, not only by the speed of the kitchen but by the friendly efficiency of our server, who didn't miss a trick (including bringing a new ketchup bottle without being asked when the first felt too light to her



Photo by Stephen B. Thornton

Fish and Chips at Cregeen's Pub

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during transit).

We were pleased with our sandwiches, the Signature Reuben (\$7.75) - a salty stack of corned beef, Swiss cheese, sauerkraut and undetected Thousand Island dressing (we prefer too little than too much) - and the Gardai Steak Wrap (\$8.25) - an herbed tortilla hugging a good amount of satisfying grilled Philly steak and cheese. Sandwiches come with "chips" (fries) or "crisps" (chips), slaw, potato salad or chips and salsa. A heap of savory battered onion rings are a worthy \$1 upgrade.

Cregeen's Sunday brunch, served from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., features Scottish Eggs and Irish Eggs, as well as the less European selections: a Brunch Quesadilla, Brunch Burrito and Western Omelet.

The pub also offers a Ladies Hour from 8:17 to 9:17 p.m. Thursdays and Saturdays, when all drinks for women are \$2.

For those who'd rather devote their calories to desserts instead of drinks (we're not those people, hence you're on your own here), the restaurant serves Bread & Butter Pudding with Jameson Whiskey Sauce (\$4.95), two kinds of cobbler (\$4.95) and Chocolate Lava Cake (\$4.95); \$1 to add ice cream.

Cregeen's Irish Pub Address: 301 Main St., North Little Rock (with another location in Jonesboro) Hours: 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Sunday, 11 a.m.-1 a.m. Monday-Wednesday, 11 a.m.-2 a.m.

Thursday-Friday, 11 a.m.-1 a.m. Saturday Cuisine: Irish fare, bar food, sandwiches, salads Credit cards: V, MC, AE, D Reservations: Large parties Alcoholic beverages: Full bar Wheelchair accessible: Yes Carryout: Yes (501) 376-7468 cregeens.com

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- Living Green
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- Business wire
- Tech wire

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- Today's Newspaper
- Razorbacks
- LR Marathon
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- AP Sports
- College Football
- NFL
- NBA

- MLB
- PGA
- NASCAR
- Tennis

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- Weekend
- Events Calendar
- Movies
- Movie Finder
- Music
- Dining Out
- Restaurant Finder
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- Comics
- Online games
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- TV listings

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