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WGNO

Local Flavor: J'Anita's in the Avenue Pub, Pralines by Jean

A pub opens its kitchen to a struggling cuisine operation, and don't miss the cupcake secret of a praline store.

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NEW ORLEANS

1. There's a lot of love out in the food world for Craig and Kimmie, owners of J'Anita's, who recently had to shutter their lower Magazine Street restaurant - blame the economy and high overhead. Closing day caused much sadness until Polly Watts, owner of The Avenue Pub (1732 St. Charles Ave.; 504-586-9243) stepped up to the plate, literally, and offered to rent her kitchen space to Kimmie & Craig. The result? J'Anita's in The Avenue Pub - a perfect marriage and low over-head.



The food is definitely pub-like, but also up-market, and will quickly transform this bar into a "gastro-pub." Of course the famous "Best Ever Fish S sammich (Grilled Redfish, Feta Cheese, Bacon, Grilled Onions, Caesar Dressing on Ciabatta) is a menu mainstay, along with the Gumbo, Brisket and Kimmie's Guacamole, but there are other brilliant sandwiches to note. The burgers are solid, but it's the Sweet Spot Burger (Burger marinated in Cabernet, Caramelized Onions, Caramelized Pears, Blue Cheese and a Balsamic reduction glaze), that's off the hook.

Rueben's can be Heaven or Hell, and J'Anita's heavenly Swamp Reuben (Pulled Pork and Brisket, with house BBQ sauce and house Coleslaw on grilled Sourdough Bread) is gorgeously complex with the housemade, crunchy slaw, and mustardy bbq sauce, vying for attention with the pulled pork and beefy brisket. The most recent addition to the "Sammich" menu is "The St. Chuck Duck" - tender roasted duck layered with cheddar and blue cheese, currant tapenade, balsamic reduction, caramelized red onion and slices of D'Anjou Pear, grilled on tart sour dough bread. It's a grilled cheese gone bonkers.

Side dishes are also top notch - I'm a convert to just finished, still warm potato salad creamy and tangy. And just for food geeks like me, there is a Chilled Cucumber soup on the menu right now. The beer selection is outstanding and for non-alcohol drinkers, there's a tap for Abita Rootbeer, poured into tall icy beer mugs. Bring on the ice cream.



2. Next door, it's dessert time at Pralines by Jean, where creamy pralines are the mad genius, but the cupcakes are rockin' too. There is always a nice selection of regular flavors like vanilla and chocolate, but keep your eyes and palate open for stellar specials like fresh Louisiana Strawberry, Nectar, Praline with Creole Cream cheese frosting and "Almond Joy" - an almond cupcake with chocolate frosting and a shower of coconut.

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