

Café



Pile It On The Diner on Clifton doesn't do small.

BY ELAINE T. CICORA

The Diner on Clifton, 11637 Clifton Boulevard, 216-521-5003. 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. daily.

I spent a few hours online the other afternoon, tracking the buzz on Michael Symon's Greek restaurant that opened last month in New York. There were the usual kudos for the handsome interior, an appreciation of Symon's small-plate concept, and the customary "compliments" along the lines of *This guy's from Cleveland, but man can he cook!*

But here's what floored me: Everyone from an anonymous blogger to *New York Times* critic Frank Bruni bitched about the *small portions*. Admittedly, small plates (or *mezes*) are meant to be bite-sized, and if what Symon is serving is stingy even by those standards, it must be microscopic. But c'mon — complaining about small portions is the domain of midwesterners, springing from our roots as factory workers and farmers. How many calories does a New Yorker need to dead-lift a BlackBerry, anyway?

Even so, the vision of Gotham's emaciated hipsters wasting away in front of \$7 specks of crispy lamb brains and pickled octopus tugged at my heartstrings all weekend — never more so than when I surveyed the overflowing platters of comfort food set before me at **The Diner on Clifton**, at the Cleveland-Lakewood border.

Now approaching its eighth anniversary, the diner has rightly become a neighborhood magnet, beloved for its jumbo portions of almost perfectly prepared diner fare and terrifically reasonable prices. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner possibilities range from eggs and bacon to herb-roasted chicken, with burgers, wraps, salads, soups, pastas, and open-faced sandwiches of all descriptions crammed in between.

Here, you poor li'l hank o' hair, I wanted to tell some starving Manhattanite. Take a big ol' bite of this here arty-choke dip, and git some meat on them bones.

The image made me happy, in a corn-fed, milk-washed sort of way, as a friend and I noshed that rich and cheesy dip, using the accompanying passel of buttery, deep-fried pita chips as scoops. Like an updated version of Ruffles and French-onion dip, the starter quickly became an addiction.

The entire diner, in fact, seems to go for that funky updated-classic vibe — but this is no cutesy retro theme. Owner Perry Drosos has chosen a clubby, contemporary motif, with purple awnings, a brightly colored mosaic tile floor, and bare, black-Formica tabletops patterned with tiny galaxies. No beer or liquor is served — an omission you might appreciate, once you've navigated the steep, narrow stairs to the basement rest-

rooms. Still, a soundtrack of thumping dance music added a little downtown oomph to a sunshiny midday visit, and at both lunch and dinner, the black-clad servers looked seriously hip, if not exactly polished.

On the other hand, the kitchen staff generally turns out food that is simple, but almost textbook-perfect in execution: Salads are crisp and generously endowed, burgers are fresh and cooked to order, and even the light, buttery mashed potatoes and homemade gravy are the real deals.

Traditional breakfast items can be had until 11 a.m. on weekdays and 2 p.m. on weekends. But the fluffy, overstuffed omelets are an all-day pleasure: Sided with two slices of whole-wheat toast and an impressive pileup of just-right home-fries, a three-cheese omelet was a mother lode of melted Swiss, cheddar, and American. An à la carte portion of finely diced corned-beef hash hit the bull's-eye too, with a taste-bud-tickling ratio of meat to spuds and just enough grease and salt to qualify as diner food.

After 11, the kitchen turns out more than two dozen styles of burgers, wraps, and sandwiches. A half-pound cheeseburger on a fresh kaiser roll wasn't as juicy as some, but the big, beefy flavor and smoky grilled essences more than compensated. On the side, a little cup of mild coleslaw and a towering tangle of freshly cut fries made classic go-withs (next time, we'll try the slim, bronzed sweet-potato fries).

One place the Diner needlessly tampers with tradition is its hot roasted turkey sandwiches, that staple of diners everywhere: The thinly sliced breast meat is tossed onto the grill before being piled onto a slice of sturdy sourdough bread — a move that only made the meat unnecessarily dry and chewy. The kitchen also got jiggy with its Tuscan chicken breast, one of a dozen entrées that join the menu after 4 p.m. Pairing the savory breast — stuffed with prosciutto, sun-dried tomato, and chèvre — with a sweet, syrupy sauce probably wasn't the surest move; on the other hand, the massive herbed polenta cake that accompanied it couldn't have been more deftly handled.

For dessert, consider a thick malt or milkshake (served in its stainless-steel mixing cup) or fruit pie shipped in from a Michigan bakery (a crumb-topped three-berry version and the double-crust cherry offered plenty of real fruit flavor). And a ginormous triple-decker slab of coconut cake, from local bakery Slices, was almost shocking in its purity and freshness.

Needless to say, we didn't leave hungry. Can't imagine a New Yorker would've either.

The Diner on Clifton

Three-cheese omelet	...\$5.25
Corned-beef hash	
(side)	...\$1.95
Artichoke-dill bake	...\$7.25
Diner deluxe	
cheeseburger	...\$6.95
Tuscan chicken	
breast	...\$11.95
Michigan cherry pie	...\$3.95



Perry Drosos shows why nobody leaves his diner hungry.

Wanda Santos-Bray

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Perry Drosos
The Diner on Clifton

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