

Pasta Beach: Light, Airy and Relaxing, but at a Price

Let's address the elephant in the cabana. Pasta Beach is a ... peculiar name.

Pasta Beach opened its long-awaited Wayland Square location in August 2016 and, for more than a year beforehand, I puzzled at the paper signs covering the upcoming restaurant's windows: "Pasta Beach." They weren't two words I'd ever thought to pair together and I found them mysterious. It was evocative, but I also didn't think my conjured image of a steaming pile of spaghetti served seaside seemed appetizing. There were two other Pasta Beaches that I could have explored while the Wayland restaurant launched, in the more geographically intuitive locations of Newport and Boston's Rowe's Wharf, but good things come to those who wait.

And the pasta at Pasta Beach is very good. Clearly, I'd fixated on the wrong word in the name.

My mother joined me for dinner at 6:30pm on a Tuesday. We were asked if we had reservations (we didn't) and seated at a high top by the window. The restaurant is deep, but narrow, and by 7:30pm all but four tables were filled. A long, white marbled bar offered additional seating and a view into the largely open kitchen.

Exposed wooden ceiling beams crisscross over the bright, welcoming room, and coral and white striped accent walls mimic the black and white cabana stripes of Pasta Beach's outside awning. More industrial touches, such as metal drum light fixtures slung from rope or the tin facade of the massive pizza oven, are softened by black and white checked chairs and colorful (admittedly beachy) cushions on the benched seating lining the space's windows. The bread is served in a yellow and purple checked cloth pouch and, as my mother was quick to point out, set the tone for the rest of our meal.

"This is the test," she said, taking a bite.

Pasta Beach's bread is awesome. The salt content is spot-on, it's crusty, it's airy, it's homemade and the restaurant knows they have a hit on their hands. They sell loaves, bakery style, at \$8 each for taking home.

Our server, Ashley, explained the chefs hailed from Italy and noted the menu items which could only be found at the Providence location - a haddock dish and six pastas, ranging from lasagna to sugo. She recommended two of the "Classic Pasta Beach" items as her favorites: tagliatelle with asparagus and prosciutto, and the buccatini with tomato sauce, bacon, onions and white wine. I ordered the tagliatelle. My mother went rogue and ordered chicken Milanese.

The issue was this: my mother had been expecting a heavy plate of pasta. She'd liked the idea of a Bolognese, but had eaten out for lunch that day and wasn't entirely hungry. When our food arrived, however, my tagliatelle was downright dainty. Historically, if I'm ordering pasta, I leave with leftovers, but that wasn't the case here, and not because the serving was insubstantial. The cream coating the tagliatelle didn't over-sauce and weigh down the noodle. The asparagus had bite, but not crunch, and even though I was literally eating prosciutto and parmigiano reggiano, nothing about my meal felt heavy or unhealthy. Dangerous.

For my mother's part, the chicken Milanese was well seasoned, but I could tell she suffered rolling regret at each dish of pasta or pizza served to our neighbors.

Our food arrived so fast (super, duper fast - part of the restaurant's founding concept is inspired by quick service neighborhood bistros in Italy), and so much of our early conversation was dominated by bread, that my mother and I didn't get to discuss our feelings on Pasta Beach's vibe until nearly the end of our meal. We agreed that we both felt comfortable. We liked our server's relaxed attitude, and we liked the variety of eating Italian in a more casual atmosphere.

We decided the best future tactic for ordering at Pasta Beach would be splitting a pasta, pizza, and salad. This was the most common order we observed, undoubtedly by neighborhood veterans who'd learned to navigate the menu. I have a hard time thinking I'd be able to order anything beside the tagliatelle. (My co-worker has the same issue straying from the lasagna, made with Bolognese and bechamel sauce, and described as "the best lasagna" she's ever had. Strong words from an Italian from Johnston.)

"I mean, I guess it feels like a vacation," my mother offered. "You're paying vacation prices." She was a bit sour on the \$21.75 price tag of her Milanese, served with a heap of arugula but no side of pasta. She had been prepared by the server that it came *a la carte*, but still fundamentally disagreed with the ethics of withholding a pasta accompaniment.

Also, she still nursed the sting of Bolognese FOMO. Life's a beach.

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