

Let's Meet Here: Family-style dining is on the menu at The River Social



It was 1 degree Fahrenheit the night my friend and I scuttled alongside the Providence River toward the mall with our heads down and scarves up, trying to protect ourselves from the cold. But something caught my eye: a neon sign where Quay used to be. “The River Social” it said in simple block lettering, with two blue water lines cutting through the text.

I’d seen their menu listed for Providence’s Restaurant Week, but I didn’t realize they were located here, just off the cobblestone path between Café Nuovo and Skyline at Waterplace, steps away from the river itself. The restaurant was closed that night (a case of the Mondays), but I made a mental note to return

on a day when my tears of joy wouldn't immediately freeze to my face.

And so, with much anticipation, my friend Heather and I showed up four days later, and I experienced déjà vu. For those of you who visited Quay, the overall layout is strikingly similar: open concept, a lengthy bar on the right, window seats along the left — the entire wall is a window, which is great for WaterFire nights. There are a couple of comfy booths, including one near the entrance, which is where we sat: on a white couch underneath a picture frame made of ferns, surrounding a neon sign that says, "Let's meet here."

Although my first reaction was, "It's the same!" I started to notice slight and beautiful differences in décor. The bar stools are plush white cushions with gilded frames, hanging lights are covered by ornate Moroccan lanterns and the ceiling even has wooden contour accents that resemble river waves. At first glance, it appears far too classy for the likes of me, a person who sometimes manages to extricate herself from gym clothes and put on fleece-lined leggings and a sweater dress. However, despite the fact our waiter, Nick, wore coattails, I never felt underdressed or unappreciated. The staff and owner were extremely welcoming. My verdict: This is a great place to dress up for romantic dinners and cocktail nights, but it's perfectly acceptable to be a casual diner.

Speaking of dining, let's talk about this menu. I saw "spicy feta" and knew immediately there was a Greek influence, but the other dishes confused me: shrimp and chips, grilled Spanish octopus, fettucine Bolognese. As I learned from Agil Nadirov, the owner, he wanted to capture a mixture of coastal Mediterranean influences, from Turkey to Israel to Spain to Italy, and everything in between. As a native of that region, he was inspired to showcase the best dishes he's experienced. We trusted him to



choose our appetizers while we ordered drinks.

The wine list mirrors the diversity of the food menu in terms of regions, but the cocktail list was where I spent the most time. Not only are there signature cocktails, but there are also Social Bowls for sharing — such as "The Colosseum," a vodka elderflower lemonade — along with Zero Proof Cocktails, non-alcohol versions of classical favorites.

Since there were only two of us, a social bowl seemed extreme (they're better shared among three or four people), so we each got a signature cocktail. Heather fancied the Running of the Bulls — rye whiskey, sherry, walnut liqueur and figs — and I went with their most popular drink, the Hello Habibi, made with gin, muddled cucumber and raspberry, thyme syrup and pink peppercorns. Heather's was

smooth and mysterious, something I imagine Ernest Hemingway sipping in between writing novels and shooting elephants, and the Hello Habibi was bright and subtly sweet, lacking gin's common stereotype of tasting like a pine tree.

The mezze plate was the first to arrive — with all five dips — and it came out in a tiered tower, reminding me of a display I saw in an Egyptian coffee shop. Hummus, fire-roasted eggplant, green tahini (made with fresh parsley), spicy feta and labneh were served with sliced pita, French baguette and colorfully assorted vegetables. “The fire-roasted eggplant is truly fire-roasted. You will taste it,” Nadirov told us, and he was right! In Turkish tradition, eggplants are completely covered by the hot embers from a wood fire, charring the skin of the eggplant and creating a truly smoky finish. This was the first sensation to hit the taste buds, followed by sweet notes from red peppers. And that was just the first dip we tried! The labneh might have been my favorite — a type of yogurt cheese mixed with Za’atar, shaved radish and sumac — light, tangy and refreshing. But given the fact Heather and I devoured all of the dips, it was hard to definitively name a favorite.

Next came the octopus. Heather and I were skeptical, but for different reasons: Heather, while okay with calamari, doesn't like the idea of octopus, and I've been spoiled by sun-dried, grilled octopus from Greece. Neither of us were interested in the all-too-common baby octopus dishes we've seen in RI, but thankfully this was different! Straight from Spain, this (full-grown) octopus is prepared correctly: grilled to bring out its meaty, rich flavor, and served atop some of the best fingerling potatoes I've ever eaten. Even Heather was converted into an octopus fan.

For our next dish to share, we were torn between tater-tot sliders and forbidden rice arancini, but Nick the waiter unabashedly reinforced the sliders, so we opted for this house specialty (and it's gluten-free, as is much of their menu): a made-from-scratch tater-tot “bun,” burger meat, smoked gouda, onion rings and BBQ sauce. This, my friends, is the epitome of high-class drunk food, and I mean that kindly. Heather and I loved it, but by this point we were so full, we couldn't finish the third slider. Our intention to order a main dish vanished along with the smoked gouda cheese and BBQ sauce.

It would not have been right, however, to leave without a bite of dessert. Unfortunately for us, a collaborative dessert with Knead donuts was unavailable that night, so we opted for chocolate mousse with GF brownies and a scoop of black raspberry gelato. It was the perfect note on which to end.

In the end, what I love about places such as these is the emphasis on family-style dining, dishes (and even drinks!) designed for sharing among a group of friends. When I asked Agil about the name of the restaurant, he simply restated his vision with a smile. “You come to the river, and you are social with



each other.”

Now that's a vision I can get behind any day of the year.

PSA: For the romantics out there, February 14 will be a special day to dine at The River Social, with Valentine's Day desserts included on the house. There are few things more romantic, in my opinion, than free dessert. Call ASAP to save your spot because reservations are required 401-256-5686.

The River Social, 200 Exchange Street, PVD. theriversocial.com