



Culinary Corner

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REVIEW



Bobby Cochran/CW photos

From soup and a sandwich to a sizzling steak off the grill, Harper's Restaurant offers a little something for everyone. Menu favorites include, from left, Duke's BLT with summer gazpacho, coffee and a fudge brownie à la mode, chicken tenders with two dipping sauces and grilled steak with homemade onion rings.

At home at Harper's

Comfortable, cozy – and the food's good too.

by Heidi Billotto
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With several hip restaurants opening amid a strong selection of innovative, long-standing favorites, Charlotteans have many exciting dining options. Sometimes, though, people don't want hip, happening, exciting or innovative. They want a safe adventure – no games or gimmicks, no eclectic twists, just a good selection of straightforward fare served in a comfortable atmosphere by a pleasant, well-trained waitstaff. When such a mood strikes, turn to Harper's Restaurant to satisfy.

Harper's has two area locations: one at Sharon Corners Shopping Center in SouthPark, the other at Carolina Place in Pineville. The original Harper's, established in 1987 on Woodlawn Road, closed earlier this year but was the first in a restaurant group that now includes Upstream, Mimosa Grill, Zink American Kitchen, Harper's Blue Ribbon Diner, M5-Modern Mediterranean, two Harper's To Go Gos and two additional Harper's Restaurants outside Charlotte.

Despite the relationship with its fine-dining sister restaurants across the city, Harper's draws a casual crowd. Families, friends and the lunch and after-work business crowds gather at both locations. Chris Hannibal, a sleight-of-hand national champion, conjures magic and whimsy to mystify customers from 7 to 9 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays at the SouthPark location and Wednesdays and Fridays at the Carolina

Place Harper's.

The restaurants' interiors are warm and comfortable without evoking the often-overdone hunting or fishing lodge design. The handmade bricks used on inside walls at the SouthPark location came from the historic Charlotte Bagging Company building on North Boulevard Street; the interior walls at the Carolina Place locale were built from bricks rescued from Charlotte's old trolley barn on South Boulevard.

Good eats

The Harper's menu changes three times a year. Each location has its own chef de cuisine, but offerings at both Charlotte locations are similar. Longtime favorites include Betty's pimento cheese, served hot with chips as an appetizer or atop a fresh-ground, grilled burger. The recipe comes from Betty Sasser, mother of Harper's Restaurant Group owner and president Tom Sasser. The thick, creamy blend of cheddar cheese, whipped and lightly seasoned with pimento and other spices, is one of Sasser's childhood favorites. It's an item much of Charlotte has come to love too, according to Sasser. "Guests wouldn't have it if we took it off the menu," he said. "The same goes for the chicken tenders."

Offered in appetizer and entrée portions, the tenders are one of the restaurant's best-selling items. The chicken, all white meat, is cut in large portions called supremes. Then it is seasoned and batter-fried to a lightly crunchy finish. Appetizer and entrée portions come with barbecue and honey-mustard dipping sauces and a side of Harper's fries. While I don't nor-

mally order chicken tenders, I must admit that this melt-in-your-mouth fried fare is a terrific treat.

Other popular offerings are penne pasta with six cheeses, the sesame-crusting ahi tuna and Harper's Danish baby back ribs. The rich penne is as good as comfort food gets; the thick-sliced tuna, seared and chilled before serving, is plated alongside a pile of garlicky Asian noodles and a small green salad. The baby

HARPER'S RESTAURANT

★★★★ out of 5

Locations: 6518 Fairview Road, across from SouthPark mall; 11059 Carolina Place Parkway, Pineville.

Phone: SouthPark, 704-366-6688; Carolina Place, 704-541-5255.

Fax: SouthPark, 704-365-7787; Carolina Place, 704-541-5277

Price range: \$6.95-\$12.95; seafood sandwiches are market-priced.

Hours: SouthPark location is open Monday-Thursday, 11 a.m.-11 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 11 a.m.-midnight; Sunday, 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Carolina Place location is open Monday-Thursday, 11 a.m.-10 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 11 a.m.-11 p.m.; Sunday, 11 a.m.-9 p.m.

Details: Limited reservations; call-ahead seating; smoke-free bars and dining rooms, with smoking allowed on patio at Carolina Place; takeout; catering; good selection of beer on tap and wines by the glass or bottle; separate bar area at SouthPark; private dining room and valet parking at Carolina Place.

For more information: Visit www.harpersrestaurants.com.

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backs are smoked, then slathered in the restaurant's proprietary sauce and served with Carolina cole slaw and fries.

Nothing worse than well-done

A longtime Harper's fan, I used to consider the classic burger topped with a thick layer of Betty's pimento cheese as my favorite lunchtime sandwich. The freshly ground Angus chuck burger used to be grilled to order, but North Carolina legislation now prevents customers from ordering ground beef cooked rare or even medium rare. There is little worse than overcooked ground beef, in my opinion. I now find the "pim burger," as it's called in Harper's kitchens, no longer worth the fat and calories. Sasser said South Carolina just changed its law regarding the serving of rare ground beef, allowing consumption at the customer's own risk. I hope North Carolina soon follows.

Harper's crab cakes also failed to impress. The cakes, served in appetizer and entrée portions or as a sandwich, are made with too much mayonnaise. I couldn't get past the mushy texture and was disappointed in the lack of taste.

On the other hand, I enjoy Harper's thin-crust pizzas, cooked to order in the wood-burning oven. The menu lists several combinations – all good – but the Margherita and the wild mushroom are

my favorites. Another favorite is the Portobello mushroom sandwich dressed with slaw, melted provolone and a tasty chipotle mustard and served with sweet potato fries on the side, although I'd like the fries more if they were a little crispier.

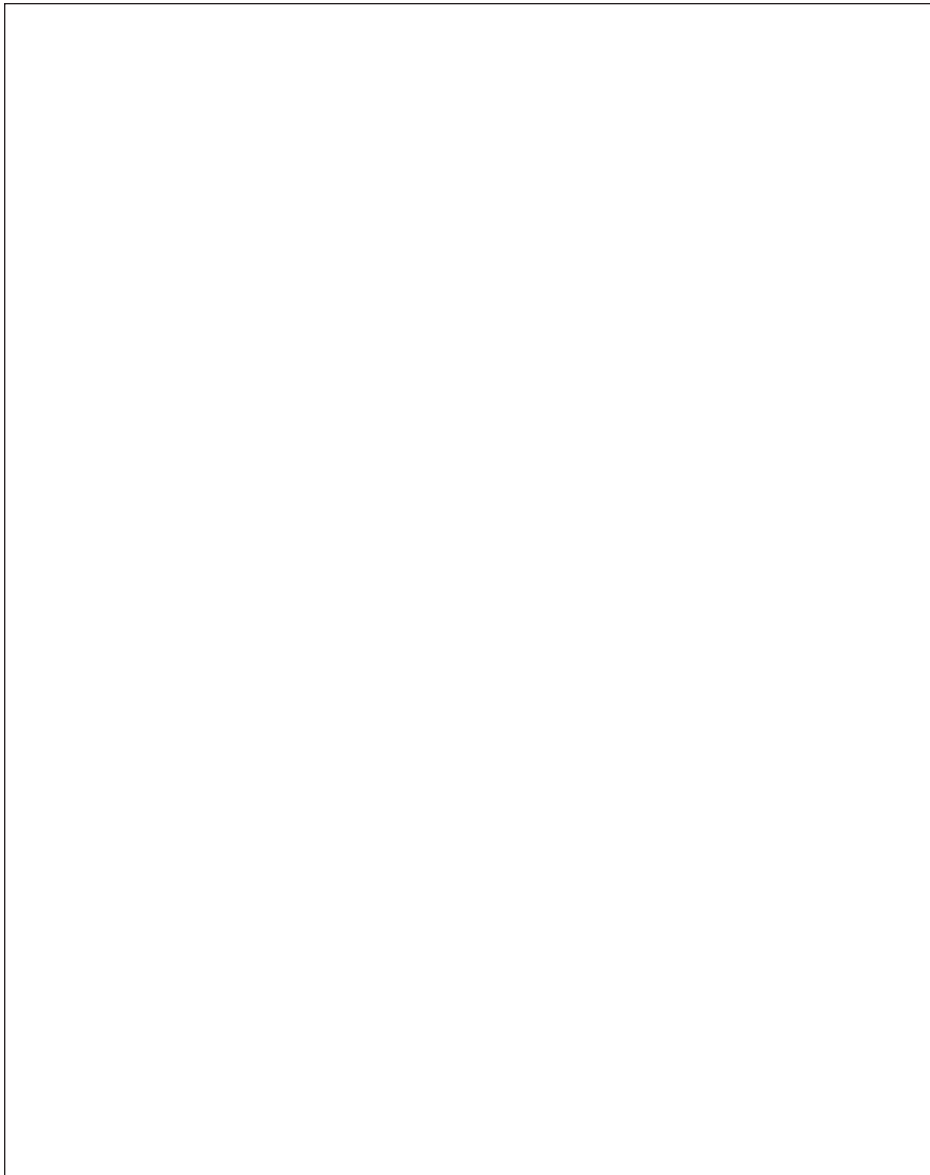
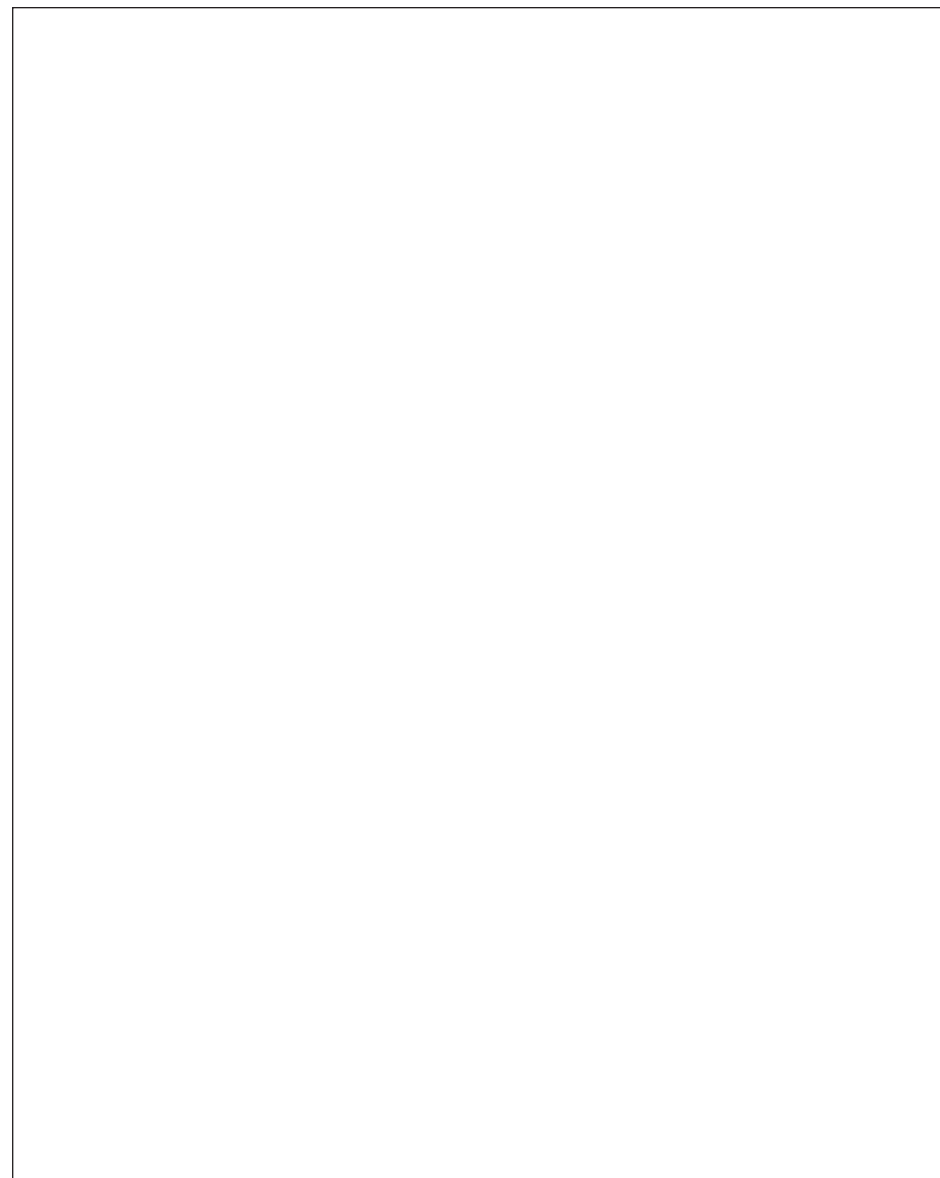
The ahi tuna and grilled salmon are always great choices, as are the crispy homemade potato chips served only at the SouthPark location.

Featured soups vary daily. This season my favorite is the flavorful gazpacho, made fresh with local tomatoes, to provide cool comfort from hot, muggy days.

A taste of summer

Through Aug. 15 both Harper's Restaurants in Charlotte are celebrating one of the season's sweetest fruits: locally grown tomatoes. Delivered several times a week, the fresh-picked stars of summer come to Harper's kitchens from Unity Farms in Denver, N.C. Specialty dishes featured this year are a tomato and roasted onion salad tossed with a chiffonade of fresh basil and balsamic vinaigrette; Harper's antipasto, made from fresh tomatoes with creamy mozzarella, prosciutto, olives, roasted red peppers, hard-boiled eggs and balsamic vinaigrette; Duke's BLT platter with fresh tomatoes, smokehouse bacon, iceberg lettuce and

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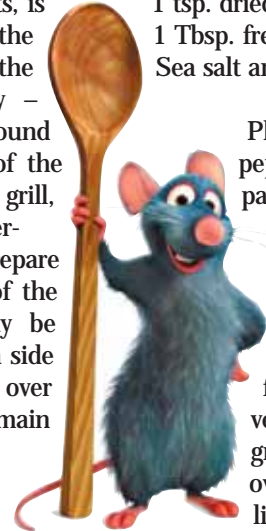


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What's cookin'

edited by **Heidi Billotto**
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It's more than a fun summer movie about a rat with gourmet skills! Ratatouille, a one-pot dish with French roots, is a vegetable stew of sorts from the region of Provence. With all the ingredients available locally – many of them grown in and around Charlotte – and with most of the cooking easily done on the grill, ratatouille struck me as the perfect summertime recipe to prepare after I'd enjoyed the movie of the same name. Ratatouille may be served hot, warm or cold as a side dish or appetizer. Or try it over pasta or pastina as a light main course.



2 Tbsp. extra virgin olive oil
1 lb. button mushrooms, halved or quartered
2 cloves garlic, minced
4-5 firm, ripe tomatoes, sliced
2 Tbsp. fresh flat-leaf Italian parsley, minced
1 tsp. dried oregano leaves
1 Tbsp. fresh thyme, minced
Sea salt and black pepper to taste

Place eggplant, zucchini, bell peppers and onion in a roasting pan lined with parchment paper. Place in a preheated 400-degree oven and roast for 20 minutes until vegetables are lightly browned. (A great alternative method of cooking for summer is to place all the vegetables on a grill grid and grill for 6-8 minutes per side over medium-high heat until lightly browned.)

ROASTED RATATOUILLE

3 Japanese eggplants, unpeeled, cut into 1/4-inch slices
3 medium zucchini, cut crosswise into 3/4-inch slices
1 red bell pepper, chopped
1 green bell pepper, chopped
2 Vidalia onions, thinly sliced

Heat the olive oil in a large saucepan. Add mushrooms and garlic and sauté for a minute or two. Stir in tomatoes, herbs, roasted or grilled vegetables and any juices that have gathered; cook for another 10 minutes. Add sea salt and pepper to taste. Cover, reduce heat, and simmer 15 minutes. □

Harper's

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mayonnaise on whole-wheat bread along with a bowl of soup and pesto pasta salad; and a pesto-marinated tilapia fillet with grilled asparagus, sliced fresh tomatoes and balsamic vinaigrette.

Happy endings

The great thing about a restaurant that's open most of the day is the abili-

ty to order dessert and coffee as a midafternoon or late-night pick-me-up as well as at meal's end. The list of Harper's desserts is tempting. The rich fudge brownie with vanilla ice cream and the multilayered carrot cake top my recommendations. I also enjoyed the cheesecake but found the key lime pie to be lackluster. The sugary-sweet apple pie à la mode seemed too much of a good thing, especially after a big meal. □