

Culinary Corner

See Culinary Corner on
unioncountyweekly.com



REVIEW



Bobby Cochran/UCW photos

Monroe's Stone Table features American fare with a Southern edge. Three favorite menu items include, from left, spinach salad topped with grilled chicken, sautéed shrimp and creamy grits and the full-flavored portobello sandwich with a homemade pesto spread.

Hidden treasure

Small Monroe eatery tucked away, top-notch

by Heidi Edidin
heidie@unioncountyweekly.com

As Union County Weekly's wandering gourmet, I travel the area's back roads and thoroughfares in search of great places to eat. This week's hunt revealed a hidden jewel in Monroe. Tucked away in the corner of a furniture and accessories store, Stone Table definitely merits attention.

The most difficult aspect of this lunchtime adventure is finding the place. Stone Table is inside the Shops at Nottingham, a former Winn-Dixie now a furniture and accessories store on Monroe's main drag, Roosevelt Boulevard. No sign or outward indication hints there is a restaurant inside, so prospective diners must simply know of Stone Table's existence.

Location, location, location

Situated in the former supermarket's deli section, the small open kitchen had an early incarnation as a hot dog stand; then the space stood empty for several years until chef Matthew Sganga applied his creative eye.

"I was looking for a kitchen for my catering company," Sganga said. "This setup was ideal, and the open area around the kitchen lent itself perfectly to restaurant seating," said Sganga, who took advantage of the layout and opened a café in the space, too. With his crew of five, Sganga caters from the small but efficient space and also serves lunch and light dinner fare daily. Seating for 45 creates a wait for tables at the height of lunch hour, but turnover is relatively fast. For those pressed for time, takeout is available.

The furniture store dictates Stone Table's hours, so the kitchen closes at a disappointingly early 6 p.m. But in the restaurant's seven hours of operation daily, diners are treated to a host of homemade fare: sandwiches, salads, freshly squeezed lemonade, desserts and more.

Excellent eats

The menu at Stone Table has remained consistent almost since the restaurant's inception nearly two years ago. When Sganga opened the café, he tried to offer something for everyone, so the menu sports a variety of selections. Aside from the popular constants, Sganga said he likes to "spice things up," introducing new items through daily specials that usually include a soup, an entrée or two and several desserts.

Santé chef and owner Adam Reed of Matthews first

STONE TABLE

★★★★ out of 5

Location: 2585 W. Roosevelt Blvd., Monroe, in the Shops at Nottingham.

Phone: 704-225-7675; Fax: 704-225-7675

Price range: \$5.50-\$10.50.

Hours: 11 a.m.-6 p.m.

Details: no smoking; catering; takeout; special requests and dietary needs accommodated when possible; children's menu.

For more information: Visit <http://stonetable-cafe.wordpress.com>.

talked up Stone Table to me – and when chefs recommend a new place, it's wise to listen. Still, I expected more of a standard deli or sandwich shop and was surprised to find so much more. Stone Table serves a creative assortment of made-to-order hot and cold sandwiches, all on bread from Nova's Bakery in Charlotte. Sganga goes beyond just sandwiches, also preparing a lovely assortment of salads with homemade dressings and a knock-your-socks-off entrée of shrimp and grits.

Winning selections include one of the best meatloaf sandwiches I've ever had. It's fresh, flavorful and baked in a sweet-and-spicy homemade Jack Daniels

barbecue sauce. Also stellar is the Portobello sandwich dressed with fresh pesto and stacked with lettuce and tomato. The spinach salad topped with thick slices of tender, grilled chicken ranks among my favorites as well.

Sandwiches come with a choice of sides. Dressed in a light vinaigrette, the black-eyed pea and corn salad is delicious. Another option, fresh fruit, looked attractive and tasted great, too.

The corn and crab soup, offered as a special on my first visit, was not as good. It was thinner than I'd hoped, and the understated flavor of the crab combined with the subtle, sweet flavor of the corn was overwhelmed by a heavy base of chicken broth. Our lunchtime selections, the portobello and meatloaf sandwiches, also presented a slight shortcoming: with each bite, the fixings slipped out. Although delicious, the crusty, fresh-baked rolls might have been too much of a good thing. We wound up eating both offerings as open-faced sandwiches, reserving the tasty top part of the bread for later.

I couldn't pass up an order of homemade pimento cheese – I'm a sucker for the stuff, so we ordered a small bowl as an additional side item. The pimento cheese didn't disappoint. It was served, as several of the side items are, with Stone Table's homemade toasted flour tortilla

strips, which add a nice crunch.

Holding out for heartier fare?

Diners with heartier entrées in mind should try Stone Table's shrimp and grits. The stone-ground grits are creamy, perfectly prepared and topped with tender shrimp sautéed to a quick finish with minced herbs. Lightly doused with a flavorful lemon Tabasco cream sauce, every rich, creamy bite simply melts in your mouth.

Stone Table's crab cake, served as a sandwich on a toasted round of bread, is more of an entrée-sized portion. Like the shrimp and grits, the patty also is dressed with lemon Tabasco cream sauce for a delicious finish.

For a cold entrée, turn to the spinach salad. Baby spinach leaves are studded with flavorful bits of country ham and tossed with dried cranberries and Stone Table's homemade Dijon vinaigrette. I enjoyed the salad topped with sliced grilled chicken, but it also is available plain or topped with grilled, sliced salmon.

Drinks, desserts, dining off-site

Bottled soft drinks and freshly brewed sweet tea are offered to accompany the meal, but lemonade is the way to go. Sganga admits that when the staff is pressed for time, the lemonade might not



The hardworking crew at Stone Table includes, from left, José León, Gregory Harbin, Nick Camereon, Molly Coleman and Sarah Dollar.

be freshly squeezed – sometimes they use bottled juice – but it's always homemade with Sganga's own simple sugar syrup and served with a fresh lemon wedge as garnish.

Don't miss dessert, whether at meal's end or as a midafternoon pick-me-up, with fresh-brewed herbal tea or house-ground coffee. Stone Table's homemade sweets include bread pudding, chocolate mousse with seasonal berries, miniature lemon curd tarts and fresh-baked cinnamon rolls topped with ice cream, to name a few. The variety includes only two offer-

ings not created in house: the cheesecake, baked locally at Nova's Bakery, and the pound cake, which Sganga orders from Mooresville and serves grilled and topped with ice cream.

The restaurant's limited hours allow Sganga and his team to spend evenings and weekends concentrating on the catering business. The catering menu contains items similar to the restaurant menu, a cuisine Sganga describes as American with a Southern edge. The crew specializes in receptions, featuring cocktail fare for up to 200 guests. □