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DINING OUT

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Pie, soup worth trip to Wabash

By Ryan DuVall | Restaurant critic

Wabash is a friendly little city with plenty to boast about.

Did you know it lays claim to being the first electrically lighted city in the world?

But one thing Wabash isn't known much for is its restaurants. I have eaten several Coney dogs at the B&K Root Beer stand when passing through on my way to Lafayette, but no one had really offered me a different option until recently, when the calls and e-mails started telling me about Market Street Grill.

Market Street Grill

**** 1/2

Out of a possible five

\$\$

Nestled in the historic S.J. Payne building built in 1898 on Market Street, the Grill fits in perfectly downtown. From the "Liars" and "Professional Liars" benches out front, to the funky array of knickknacks inside, it feels like an original. There is an old barber's chair in one corner, a stuffed bear's head on one wall, photos of former presidents on another and a working toy train circling the bar in the middle of the main dining room. Up a few stairs to the left is a much more formal dining area showing off the old building's original tall decorative ceiling.

I was told I *had* to start my visits with the restaurant's signature BLT soup. This creamy, somewhat buttery mix of chicken stock, chopped bacon, diced tomatoes and thinly sliced lettuce was unique and delicious. The lettuce maintained a bit of texture, and the bacon added the perfect saltiness. I also tried Market Street's award-winning chili. It was also quite nice thanks to the addition of chunks of prime rib, but I was shocked at how mild it was. There was some of owner "Wild" Bill Gerding's hot sauce on my table, but I had to add quite a bit to bring the chili up to a level of heat I liked.

The soups were really the only must-have starters I had at Market Street. When it comes to salad, choose the Caesar, which had a nice mix of greens and a healthy amount of Parmesan, over the rather boring house. But if you do choose the house, go with Market Street's hot bacon dressing. It was just a tad sweet but was full of bacon flavor and made me wonder why a spinach salad wasn't offered.

One of the signs in the dining room said, "Welcome to Market Street Grill, home of the drunken chicken. If there is a better piece of chicken, only the rooster knows about it." The drunken chicken is made by soaking a breast in buttermilk, rolling it in seasoned flour and Parmesan cheese and then pan sautéing it with butter and sauterne wine. It is then smothered with mushrooms, mozzarella cheese and sprinkled with a parmesan and Romano cheese blend. Drunken or sober, I think you will like this chicken as it is bursting with flavor. It reminded me of chicken picatta, only heartier and better.

I couldn't pass on this unique offering: steak on a stick. Described as "all steak, no veggies," chunks of boneless porterhouse were simply skewered and grilled. And the meat was simply wonderful. It was tender and juicy and quite easy to eat. No veggies were needed, but I did find that Market Street Grill's homemade potato salad was a great side to go with it. It had big chunks of skin-on red potato lightly coated with a creamy, light yellow dressing that was rather sweet.

Another nice side was Market Street Grill's baked beans, which I sampled with a couple of barbecued entrées. These bright red beauties had a nice ketchupy sweetness (not super sweet like ones loaded with molasses and brown sugar), and they were just perfect with Gerding's barbecue fare.

And the best of that fare was the monster 1-pound double-smoked pork chop. This thick, fat-edged piece of pork was light pink and had that delectable smoky, ham-like flavor. When slathered with Market Street's sweet, tangy barbecue sauce and finished under the broiler, it was fantastic.

The open-range half-chicken is covered with a blend of herbs and spices, slow-cooked and then finished on the char-broiler. The meat is ridiculously tender and juicy, but the skin helps it keep some texture. It was a big hunk of bird, too.

Speaking of big hunks, desserts will blow you away. Market Street Grill offers a variety of giant pies and cakes. The

best by far was the peanut butter pie. This monster was easily 8 inches tall, about 5 inches wide, and it honestly must have weighed 2 pounds. The base was rich and creamy and had a cheesecake-like texture. How anybody could eat an entire slice after a meal is beyond me. Mine spent three days in the fridge being picked at.

The waitresses at Market Street must have some impressive biceps from hauling the dessert trays from table to table because they were loaded with giant desserts. The cookies-and-cream cake with its white creamy base was good but bland in comparison with the rich peanut butter pie. There was one cheesecake that size, but I just had to take a pass.

But I will not take a pass on another trip to Market Street Grill. I still love the B&K, but Market Street is in a whole different class. The service was small-town good, the atmosphere is great for a night out with friends or a special occasion, and the food was unique and tasty. Plus, the menu offers everyone a two-bite guarantee: "Take two bites of any entrée; if you are not pleased, we'll exchange if for anything else at regular menu price – no questions asked."

And two bites of that pie are probably all you will need.

Restaurant: Market Street Grill

Address: 90 W. Market St., Wabash

Phone: 260-563-7779

Hours: 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 5 to 9:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday; 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 5 to 10:30 p.m. Friday; 5 to 10:30 p.m. Saturday

Smoking status: Both

Handicapped accessible : No

Alcohol served: Full bar

Credit cards accepted: Yes

Kid-friendly: No, must be 18 to enter

Menu: BLT soup (\$2.59 cup; \$3.29 bowl); chili (\$2.99 cup; \$3.99 bowl), rib tickler (\$5.99), Buffalo wings (\$6.99), drunken chicken (\$12.99), BBQ chicken (\$10.99), smoked pork chop (\$14.99), steak on a stick (\$18.99), pies (\$4.99)

Note: Restaurants are categorized by price range: \$ (less than \$20 for three-course meal), \$\$ (\$20-\$29); \$\$\$ (\$30-\$39), \$\$\$\$ (\$40-\$49), \$\$\$\$\$ (\$50 and up).

Ryan DuVall is a restaurant critic for The Journal Gazette. This review is based on two unannounced visits. The Journal Gazette pays for all meals. E-mail him at rduvall@jg.net, call at 461-8130, or go to the "Dining Out" topic of "The Board" at www.journalgazette.net. DuVall's past reviews can also be found under the Web site's Food tab.

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