



RESTAURANT REVIEW

Come Home to the Lil' Red Baron

BY *Diane Taylor*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Marty McAuliff*

It's a bleak, gray evening the Thursday night I walk into the Lil' Red Baron in Newport to have dinner with my two adult children. Outside, the dining area set up under a white tent sits empty, and no one is drinking beers around the stone cold fire pit, waiting for a table to open up. It's the kind of dreary scene that makes you miss summer and dread the onset of winter.

But that's just the outside. Inside the Lil' Red Baron is a totally different story.

I open the door to the sounds of laughter, a frozen margarita churning in a blender, and a sports program broadcasting from the television. I sit down at a tiled table that brightens up the room with the cheery blue and yellow flower motifs for which Mexico is famous. My waiter delivers a basket of fresh tortilla chips and salsa and takes my order for a \$3 margarita — on the rocks, no salt. And, before I know it, the night doesn't seem nearly so bad.

That is my experience of the Lil' Red Baron when I arrive there with my son, Dennis Deuring, and my daughter, Alison Taylor. They both live in Lebanon now, but they were born and raised in Dallas, Texas, where they grew up accustomed to dining in family friendly Mexican restaurants that offered copious amounts of food at reasonable prices — restaurants where people reconnected at the end of the day to the aroma of sizzling fajitas; restaurants that felt like home.

MORE INFO

Lil' Red Baron is located on 8 Airport Road in Newport. Learn more at www.lilredbaron.com



Save room for the Mexican shrimp fajitas

These are all characteristics that apply to the Lil' Red Baron. Which is odd, considering owner Mike Foulds never intended to own a Mexican restaurant.

"This is nothing I ever saw myself doing," says Foulds, in between playful bantering with regular customers at the bar and fielding questions from prep cooks in the kitchen.

The native of Ridgefield, Conn., came to the Upper Valley eight years ago to keep his brother, John, company and bide his time while he waited for a buddy of his from the University of Connecticut to finish his degree and a new business development in downtown Storrs (near the university) to take shape.

"I don't know if you've ever been to Storrs, but it's not much of a college town. There's virtually nothing there," Foulds says. "No restaurants. No bars. No nothing."

So when the town planned to develop a business district, Foulds and his

friend thought they would become partners in a bar/restaurant that would cater to the college crowd. Only years passed and the development never came to fruition, and Foulds appeared to be learning the tricks of the restaurant trade at the Flying Goose in New London and Molly's in Hanover for naught.

Then one day Foulds happened to browse the real estate section of the local newspaper. "I don't know why I was looking at real estate ads," Foulds laughs, "but it's something I've always liked to do."

It's how Foulds happened to notice that the Lil' Red Baron was for sale, and how he came to purchase the business four years ago, on Sept. 15 no less, which just happens to be Mexican Independence Day.

Making changes

If Foulds is something of an accidental restaurant owner, he's following in the footsteps of the Lil' Red Baron's

original entrepreneurs, Dan Lloyd and his wife, Kathy Walsh. Back in 2002, Lloyd and Walsh started the Lil' Red Baron as a seasonal ice cream shop. But when Lloyd, who came to Newport from southern California, whipped up some Mexican fare to serve at a Newport fundraiser and found a crowd quickly forming around his table, he and Walsh decided to add some take-out tacos and burritos to the ice cream menu. That led to people wanting to sit down and enjoy their meal with Mexican beer and margaritas, which in turn led to Lloyd and Walsh renovating the building, and hiring more help.

It also led to Lloyd, an auto appraiser for insurance companies, working two jobs. After a while, he says, it got to be too much. "It was killing me," Lloyd recalls. "Kathy told me I had to make a decision between my auto appraisal business and the restaurant."

Lloyd sold the Lil' Red Baron to Foulds in 2006 and Foulds has continued to expand the business ever since.

When Foulds took over, the Lil' Red Baron could sit just 24 diners. Today, it seats 80. The bar used to be a small, straight counter that could accommodate no more than a handful of people. Today, it is an expanded U-shaped bar that serves as the hub of the restaurant, drawing people together to share drinks and talk about their day.

Foulds even expanded the Lil' Red Baron into the great outdoors, setting up an al fresco dining area complete with a tiki bar and a metal fire pit that people flock to on warm nights.

The menu has changed over the years, too, primarily with the addition of a variety of "gringo" offerings, like sweet potato fries, hamburgers, chicken

wraps and barbecue pulled pork. "But we didn't take any of the original Mexican foods off the menu," Foulds says. "As we added new items, we kept all the favorite Mexican recipes that the original owner had developed. It keeps the peace between the men and the women. We get calls from women who want to come for the Mexican food, but they're checking to see if we also have gringo food for their husbands. They say as long as we have hamburgers, the guys will be happy."

Fresh and flavorful

My kids and I, on the other hand, don't come to a Mexican restaurant looking for gringo food. We come looking for our old favorites: enchiladas and quesadillas, fresh guacamole and tortilla soup, chimichangas and salsa. And our expectations of Mexican fare are based on what we knew in Texas: fresh and flavorful, piquant rather than outrageously spicy. On all these counts, the Lil' Red Baron earns solid, respectable grades.

The guacamole that starts our meal is clearly homemade, brimming with chopped cilantro, onions and tomatoes, and avoiding the pureed texture that guacamole takes on at other establishments. To our taste, the salsa is a tad on the sweet side, but that sweetness is nicely offset with an order of chipotle chicken wings. They have a Mexican kick that cranks up the temperature on your taste buds, but they arrive with carrot sticks and blue cheese dressing if you care to cool things down.

What I appreciate the most about our entrees is the distinctly smoky flavor of the chicken and the judicious application of cheese. Lil' Red Baron successfully resists the sins that Yankee Mexican

restaurants tend to commit: mistaking hot and spicy for tasty, and burying everything in an avalanche of cheese.

At the Lil' Red Baron, we enjoy enchiladas, quesadillas, soup and chimichangas (listed on the menu as chivvy chungas) that blend the natural strength of jalapenos with the more subtle flavors of caramelized onions, grilled zucchini, red bell peppers and roasted corn. That these foods strike a delightful balance between Mexican hot and Yankee bland is made even better by the fact that we don't have to tunnel through a mountain of cheese to uncover them.

Our one disappointment with the Lil' Red Baron is the rice. Though we arrive early in the evening, we suspect the rice has languished too long in a heating tray. It's good, but it doesn't quite meet our standard for freshness. But that's a minor criticism. The food here is good, and the local atmosphere is great, perhaps even extraordinary.

When Foulds says he can't hardly count the ways that his regular customers have ensured the success of the Lil' Red Baron, he's not kidding. Patrons don't just frequent his restaurant. They also donate time and labor, showing up to lend a hand when tables need to be tiled, or walls need to be painted, or an ice cream truck needs to be re-outfitted to serve ice cream at the weekly auto show.

"There's no way I could have made it this far without the locals," Foulds says.

And those locals remain an integral part of the Lil' Red Baron dining experience. They congregate around the bar, call to one another across tables, and file through the front door on a dreary Thursday night until the whole place is abuzz with good cheer. **K**

Diane Taylor is a freelance writer. If her life is a dream where she gets paid to eat and to write, she hopes no one will wake her up anytime soon!

Marty McAuliff loves to photograph the natural beauty of New Hampshire and the early American architecture that makes New England special.



Guacamole, chips and a margarita



Owner Mike Foulds