

Food

Restaurant review: Jack's Café in Westwood

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BY ELISA UNG

RESTAURANT REVIEWER

Now why can't there be more places like Jack's Café in the world? Where you can walk in and get a quick, fuss-free meal that tastes like it was made with love. Where the waitress plunks down dessert at the next table and announces: "The frosting is extra fudgy tonight. I had a sliver." Where the bathrooms are labeled "Bruce Springsteen" and "Audrey Hepburn," and a regular is teasing the chef's daughter for using the Bruce bathroom. Where when you walk in you feel like you're home, even if you've never been there before.



BETH BALBIERZ / THE RECORD

Chris D'Eletto is the chef-owner of Jack's Cafe on Broadway in Westwood.

This little 40-seat Westwood gem is the creation of Chris D'Eletto, who once owned Westwood's Backstreet Café (yes, he's a Springsteen fan) and has also cooked on the set of "The Sopranos," for the Helmsley Hotel in Manhattan, and for a pasta and sandwich bar that was a favorite of mob boss John Gotti ("The FBI thought I was connected. I'm just a cook!" D'Eletto said).

Jack's Café, named for D'Eletto's late father, is a casual BYO, sort of like a friendly diner/luncheonette, with exceptionally good, simple, homey food. Walk by its retro façade, with its name in an old-fashioned script, and you might conjure up images of greasy hamburgers and stale sandwiches. Walk inside, and you'll find fried brie, lobster ravioli, carrot-dill soup and a cheese steak that I couldn't stop eating (and I used to live in Philadelphia).

The entrées are hearty enough that you don't need appetizers, but order the mini burgers anyway. The fun dish (\$7.50) gets you three of them, hand-formed, encased in potato rolls, and served with a heap of fried onions and half-moon-cut pickles. A cup of café potage (\$3.95), a carrot and dill soup thickened with rice (and surprisingly, no potatoes or cream), was quite satisfying. Four squares of breaded and deep-fried, yet grease-free, mild brie (\$6.95) were gooey on the inside and served with very sweet, goopy honey mustard. "Jack's famous stuffed mushrooms" (\$5.95) were four large caps with a beautifully seasoned stuffing filled with shallots and garlic.

For entrées, look to the blackboard. A popular special is veal Corleone (\$23), "named for my favorite movie character of all time," D'Eletto says. It's breaded milk-fed veal and prosciutto di Parma spread with pesto and wrapped around shrimp, in a mixture of the house scampi, brown and

JACK'S CAFE - ***

325 Broadway, Westwood
201-666-0400
jackscafenj.com

Food: American and eclectic. Excellent simple, home-style, wholesome food.

Ambience: Casual BYO with a retro diner/luncheonette feel across the street from the Westwood train station.

Service: Casual, fast and exceptionally friendly and/or chatty.

Value: Excellent for level of food, though daily blackboard specials can run much higher than menu items (all prices are posted).

Appetizers \$3.95 to \$8.95, entrées \$7.50 to \$23.

Would be good for: No-fuss family dinner with children, group dinner for people of varying tastes.

Less appropriate for: Anyone who prefers a more formal atmosphere or service, wants more refined or complex food, or might not be charmed by the quirks.

Recommended dishes: Mini burgers, veal Corleone, Jack's special cheesesteak.

Hours: 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Friday, 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. Saturday, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Sunday. Closed Monday.

Liquor, wine: BYO.

Noise level: A diner-like buzz of conversation and clinking forks.

Credit cards: AE, D, MC, V. Reservations: Accepted only for parties of six or more. Same-day call-aheads accepted for all size parties.

Accommodations for children: Menu.

Recommended dress: Casual.

Early bird specials or deals: No.

Takeout: Yes. Lunch delivery in the Pascack Valley area.

tomato sauces. I was skeptical, but it was delicious, especially with creamy red bliss mashed potatoes.

Stuffed chicken (\$17) was moist and packed with prosciutto, shallots, sun-dried tomatoes and artichoke hearts. Purchased lobster ravioli (\$23) had a rather disappointing filling that was more bread-y than lobster-y, but came in a rich vodka sauce and was topped with a generous pile of fresh lobster. Jack's special cheese steak (\$9.25) was conceived out of desperation, when one day D'Eletto was almost out of cheese and whipped up a cream cheese-based sauce. It adds a burst of flavor to the sirloin/top round mixture, with American cheese and bread that stands up nicely to the steak.

D'Eletto makes many of the desserts himself. His carrot cake (\$5) was jammed with well-defined shredded carrots, making it exceptionally moist and hearty. Apple pie (\$6 with vanilla ice cream) was packed with crisp Granny Smith apples in a mixture of heavy cream and sugar that made it kind of sticky and filmy, but tasty. Crème brûlée (\$5) was freshly torched but oily, with a too-thick sugar crust.

On one visit, we gave our dessert orders to D'Eletto's daughter, Sara, who was putting together the desserts that night. Our waitress swung by and conspiratorially asked what we had chosen: When we mentioned the chocolate torte (\$5), she smiled in approval and admitted to occasionally eating its icing by itself. We giggled as she walked away sheepishly saying, "I didn't say it was right!" But, after tasting the torte, it seemed understandable.

We were so tempted by the dessert case that we wound up taking home two additional desserts — a slice of homemade blueberry pie (\$5) and a frutti di bosco mixed berry tart (\$6) purchased from Bakers Perfection in Rockaway; even after a day sitting in our refrigerator, both were terrific.

The staff is very friendly and filled with family: On a recent Saturday night, our waiter was D'Eletto's oldest son, John, who kept asking us individually how each dish was and seemed honestly pleased that we liked them.

As we got up to leave, I saw that at the bottom of the Jack's specials blackboard, someone had written, "You rock my world." I had to agree.

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