

Top 20 Restaurant of the Week: Houlihan's

by Joanna Gray, *For the Southern*

City dining comes to the country at Houlihan's Restaurant, just east of Carbondale on Route 13 at Reed Station Parkway. Houlihan's is a national chain, but there's nothing "pre-packaged" about the quality of the freshly prepared food and friendly service.

"Houlihan's is special because we make all of our food from scratch every day starting at 5:30 a.m.," General Manager Shane Smith said. "Everything is made with fresh herbs and spices, which gives each dish more bold flavor than freeze-dried herbs. If a dish features cilantro, then you know it's real cilantro."

Houlihan's bruschetta appetizer passes the fresh herb test with flying colors. This popular Italian-inspired appetizer comes with a goat cheese blend with freshly torn basil over chopped ripe tomatoes. Spread it on focaccia crisps and top with chopped Mediterranean olives for an infusion of flavor in every bite. The bruschetta is accompanied with field greens in just the right amount of balsamic vinaigrette

But many Houlihan's customers can't stop at just one appetizer, especially during the restaurant's half-price appetizer special from 4 to 6 p.m. daily.

"We tried five different appetizers today - the Thai wings, quesadilla, calamari, stuffed mushrooms and the lettuce wraps," said Phinaka Agwu, an SIU student living in Carbondale. "Everything is good here, and the people are really nice."

"I really liked the calamari and the lettuce wraps the best," said Lawrence Emembolu, Phinaka's friend visiting from Missouri. "We'll definitely come back again."

Houlihan's appetizers are just the start of a unique dining experience in a fun atmosphere. Enticing entrees include an 8-ounce Cabernet filet mignon in a red wine mushroom sauce, Yukon gold mashed potatoes and French green beans or grilled asparagus. Seafood lovers will enjoy the seared Georges Bank scallops with lemon-asparagus risotto, baby greens and basil-infused olive oil. Another customer favorite is the buttermilk fried mahogany chicken with "honest" mashed gold potatoes and green beans with mustard butter.

Be sure to indulge in dessert, especially the decadent bourbon pecan pie topped with caramel and Cointreau chantilly cream, or the white chocolate banana cream pie. Chocolate lover? Don't miss the chocolate cappuccino cake with chocolate ganache and espresso icing, served with vanilla ice cream and Kahlua fudge sauce.

Houlihan's full-service bar is separate from the main dining area and features specialty drinks, including a wide selection of popular flavored martinis. Customers can also order appetizers in the bar area. Adjacent to the bar is "The Lounge," a living-room-like area with comfy couches and chairs where groups can relax and enjoy drinks and appetizers. Free Wi-Fi is available.

What's more, one of the best-kept secrets is that Houlihan's is also a great place for breakfast from 6 to 10 a.m. every day. Morning, noon and night, Houlihan's satisfies every appetite.

"Our customers always tell us that Houlihan's has a fun atmosphere and is totally different than anything else in the area," Smith said. "Just give us a try."

Details

Where: 2310 Reed Station Parkway, Carbondale

Hours: 6 a.m. to 10 p.m., bar open until 11 p.m., Sunday through Thursday; 6 a.m. to 11 p.m., bar open until midnight, Friday and Saturday

Phone: 618-457-4020

Menu specialties: Half-price appetizers 4 to 6 p.m. daily, drink specials, prime rib every Friday and Saturday after 5 p.m.

Did you know? Houlihan's is open for breakfast every day from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m.