

Daily Gazette article

Sunday, September 8, 2013

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Ambition a bohemian cafe with food that hits the spot

By Caroline Lee

SCHENECTADY — Ambition Cafe defies description, but I'll try. The decor is an amalgam of zebra prints, feather boas, slightly worn vinyl booths thoughtfully patched with like-color duct tape, original concert posters from the '60s and '70s, album covers and beer caps.

It's fascinating, a train wreck of a place, in that you cannot look away. From the original white tile floor to the tin ceiling, from the pink Christmas lights in the window to the lunch counter and cozy living room in the back, it's eclectic, bizarre, yet warm and friendly. We loved it.

Let me begin telling you about it by saying that Ambition is open for breakfast and lunch, and on some occasions — such as when Proctors has something going on — dinner. We went for lunch and our food was great. It's also great for people-watching.

Jay Street was looking its best on that sunny summer afternoon, with lots of foot traffic and sandwich boards and small groups of tables and chairs set out, even for the businesses that don't serve food. This small pedestrian block is one of the best things about Schenectady; it's part European city, part bohemian Greenwich Village. Ambition, as you may have guessed, leans boho.

It's seat yourself, so we slipped into a booth by the door and gawked. It took a while to get someone to bring us menus, but drinks and an apology followed immediately and service was snappy the rest of the time, so I'm not complaining.

Invent your own

The menu for lunch is mostly sandwiches, with a few salads, burgers, and soups. They invite you to invent your own sandwich and provide step-by-step instructions, or choose on of their well-put-together specialty sandwiches.

The Crabby Marc (\$9) stuffs a crab cake into a grilled pita with a dollop of horseradish remoulade, the Ragin' Cajun (\$9) rounds out a spicy grilled chicken breast with lettuce, tomato, mayo, bacon, and Muenster on grilled sourdough. There are way more choices, and they all look good. You can get soup and salad or soup and a half-sandwich as well.

We didn't quite know what to make of the saucy comments on the menu, like "We guarantee that your soup AND the wait staff will be hot!" There are rebukes for those who want to make changes to sandwiches: "Specialty sandwiches cannot be made half size. Any changes are fifty cents each."

Woe unto those who want to share — you'll pay for two half sandwiches instead. They're entitled to make the rules, although I'd disregard the one that says, "Clothing Optional Beyond This Point" And a heads-up: "Some employees may contain nuts!"

You must try the flavored lemonade (\$2.85). Of the six or so choices, Lisa had blackberry lemonade and I had peach. You're sure to say what Lisa did after the first sip, "Ooh, that's really delicious." Lemonade is served in charming and practical pint-sized Ball canning jars with square ice cubes and cheerful green straws and it goes down easy.

Super soups

Both of the day's soups were excellent. The creamy carrot ginger (\$2.75) was a bit sweet, rich, and with plenty of ginger. I liked the chicken lentil, a thick, chunky dark soup with slices of carrot and pieces of chicken. They know how to make a good soup, but my saltines were a bit stale. Lisa reported that hers were just fine.

Sandwiches came promptly. Lisa ordered Brie my Raspberry (\$8), with grilled turkey, brie, raspberry compote, chopped walnuts and lettuce on soft white sourdough bread. "I can taste all the parts," she said after a bite and then, "The walnuts add crunch." The half sandwich facing me looked all melty and appetizing. The half that was supposed to go home didn't make it there. She loved it.

I had the Ambition (\$8), with soft grilled chicken breast, roasted red peppers, pesto and fresh snowy mozzarella. It is a

classic combination of ingredients, and it's delicious. A word about the bread: my square herb focaccia roll was soft and tasty, and I'd buy them if I could find them in a store. You can see and smell the green bits of herb, and it's not heavy at all, like focaccia can sometimes be.

The sandwich was steaming when it was brought to the table, and in a few minutes the mozzarella got all soft and stringy. It was one of the best sandwiches I've had.

Pickles and chips

Sandwiches come with a sliced dill pickle and corn chips. "Does that work for you?" our server asked, back when she took our orders. It did. Lisa's corn chips were super-salty and round and mine were quarter-circles. They were both good, and Lisa said the pickles were, too.

The tab for this very nice lunch came to \$35.46 with two lemonades, tax, and tip. We really enjoyed the food, and what's more, we enjoyed ourselves. Ambition thanks customers on the back of the menu. "You work hard for your money, so why settle for average?" There is nothing average about Ambition.