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Big, varied & ready to play

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At Union Pizzeria, diners choose beef or chicken for the Union Philly, which is topped with sautéed green peppers, onions, mushrooms and melted Provolone.

Few would guess that the new Union Pizzeria & Sports Bar near 14th and Cuming Streets shares an owner with Frank's Pizzeria at 132nd Street and West Dodge Road.

The Union is a spacious, flat-screen-TV-lined sports bar and full-service restaurant inside the new Holiday Inn. Contrast that with Frank's, Joe D'Elia's little but lovable, six-year-old, order-at-the-counter, neighborhood hole-in-the-wall.

D'Elia's pizza is the common link. At both places, it is straight out of Brooklyn: consistently A-OK, hand-tossed, thin-crust New York-style slices you can fold in half and happily munch while marching down the street.

But pizza is only a fraction of the menu at the Union, which serves a more varied audience than the other location: those who live, work and travel in this construction-impeded, up-and-coming stretch of Cuming; folks who flock to sporting and cultural events downtown; and guests of the attached and arty Holiday Inn who want everything from room service and breakfast to salads, steaks and bar food.

And, though I didn't try breakfast or room service, the Union seemed to be handling its expanded-from-Frank's range rather well on lunch and dinner visits in late May and early June.

After glimpsing a fellow tossing dough just beyond the kitchen door, I couldn't pass up the pizza. The White Pizza and the Carnivore's Delight both delighted.

The first replaced red sauce with tons of simple appeal: garlic, a healthy frosting of fresh and creamy ricotta, great gobs of melted mozzarella and a smattering of what I took to be dried parsley. The crust was as thin and crisp as anything beneath that much cheese could be. I pronounced it gooey, messy and wonderful.

The second was a meat-lover's pie with a bit more char on the crust, real bits of bacon, Canadian bacon, Italian sausage, pepperoni, mozzarella and a tomato sauce that smacks of New York. Manager Kyron O'Brien said later that the sauce is made fresh daily with whole tomatoes.

A slightly thicker, more stewed-tasting marinara coated the veal parmesan sandwich and played an encore in the Italian burger, a juicy, flattened meatball on a toasted bun with melted provolone.

I loved the toasted Rotella's hoagie that the veal parm came on. The veal, not too thin, was evenly crusted in crisp golden herbed breadcrumbs.

Most sides delivered, even when they were house-doctored rather than house-made. Onion rings had crisp, crystalline coats. The minestrone soup was more tomato-based than I'd expected but was hot, well-seasoned and studded with beans and ditalini (super-short tube-shaped noodles). A side salad was fresh and cold, made with iceberg lettuce, purple cabbage, shredded carrot, two slices of thoughtfully soaked (and therefore less aggressive) red onion, a baby carrot and one slice of ripe red Roma tomato. The balsamic vinaigrette was creamy and tangy.

And don't get me started on the garlic knots — delicious and evil for anyone trying to maintain a discernible waist. A savory version of mini cinnamon rolls, these twisted buns oozed garlic, butter, olive oil and salt. They came in a paper-lined plastic basket with a cup of not-chunky-but-still-viscous marinara. Ours were slightly blackened on top, but still terrifically addictive.

Served six or 12 to an order as appetizers, these house-made rolls also show up as accompaniments to pasta dishes. And I'm told there's a cinnamon roll version on the breakfast menu. Uh-oh.

Two quibbles: The cannoli we tried had good chocolate-flecked, orange-flavored fluffy ricotta fillings but rather hard and stale-tasting shells. O'Brien said they just don't sell enough cannoli to justify making the shells on site. And the steamed vegetables offered as a side involved three dried-out, splintered, chalky-looking baby carrots and a few florets of unseasoned broccoli and cauliflower that no veggie-lover would enjoy. O'Brien told me later he's seeking a better vegetable side that can be prepared in small portions and won't wither between infrequent orders from diners.

The place was neither dead nor particularly bustling when we were there well ahead of the College World Series rush. The kitchen was swift, the servers a nice blend of easygoing and conscientious.

Prices seemed reasonable. Most entrees hovered in \$8-to-\$12 territory without a drink. Kids meals were \$4 to \$6, including beverage and dessert. And my new favorite snack — a half-dozen of those tempting garlic knots — was less than \$3.

The clean, casual styling of the place — high ceilings with neatly painted exposed ductwork, a big bar with a brushed steel knee guard, high and low cherry wood tables, a few framed jerseys from local college sports teams — probably lends it equally well to the hotel breakfast crowd and pre- and postgame fans.

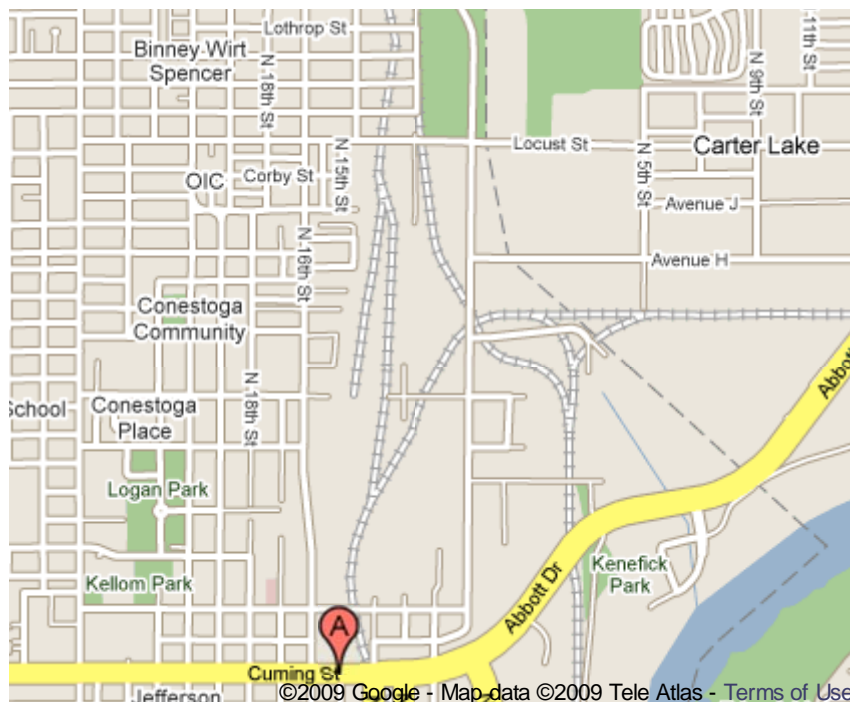
Near the door that divides the restaurant from the art-lined hotel lobby, there's a plaque that makes clear that the Union is an independently owned restaurant, not a chain or a subsidiary of the hotel.

That's a justifiable mark of pride.

The Union's grasp of food and service basics this early in the game suggests it's poised to capitalize even more when Cuming Street reopens, fall and winter sports get under way, and the College World Series comes to NoDo.

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