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Monday, November 7, 2011

Group of foodies digs into, rates local fare



From left, diners Anna Vaillancourt, Donna Dufault and John Dion are served meals by Simona Alenak, a staffer at Shiraz. (MATT WRIGHT)

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WORCESTER — They may not be seasoned food critics, but like anyone, really, the group of 14 eaters that piled into Shiraz Armenian Cuisine on Park Avenue knew good food when they ate it, and knew good service when they were getting it.

And at Shiraz, the consensus seemed to be they were getting both.

The group calls itself WorcesterFoodies, and this roving band of semipro restaurant reviewers descends on a different eatery the first Tuesday of every month armed only with empty stomachs and an index card, on which they scribble reviews that are later posted on WorcesterScene.com, the popular local website run by Luke Vaillancourt.

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The intent of the WorcesterFoodies offshoot of WorcesterScene.com is to expose readers to a city restaurant scene that "in the past 10 years has become phenomenal," Mr. Vaillancourt said. The first few months the group met, they hit the more well-known spots, but after a year or so, they've started to get more creative.

"The interest transformed into trying to find the next hole-in-the-wall," Mr. Vaillancourt said.

The group has an advertising and marketing tie-in with the Niche Hospitality group, which owns and operates Bocado Tapas Bar, Mezcal Cantina & The Citizen Wine Bar, and has quarterly tastings at those restaurants. But for the monthly get-togethers, the restaurants are chosen by various members of the group. Mr. Vaillancourt, director of digital marketing for his family business, Vaillancourt Folk Art in Sutton, said there's a core group of about 15 diners, with 10 or so part-time members. The bulging size of the group has led Mr. Vaillancourt to create a waiting list.

Shiraz, perhaps better known for its brisk lunch business, was chosen by member John Dion, who said he brings his family there. Sitting across from his wife, Charlotte, Mr. Dion said the service is always friendly, and said the Chicken Port Said there is the "first type of chicken they ate that didn't take the form of a nugget."

Donna Dufault enjoyed her Chicken Port Said, a popular chicken and mushroom dish, but said after eight outings with them, the WorcesterFoodies group has given her perspective on what really makes a good meal. Service is everything, she said, as other members of the group chimed in with stories of restaurants holding back on complimentary bread and being rushed out by wait staff while trying to enjoy late-night dinners.

"There's no reason to go out to eat if the service isn't good," Ms. Dufault said.

Mr. Vaillancourt said the dining experiences aren't always great, and it's clear from a quick online scroll through WorcesterFoodies which restaurants underwhelmed the group.

"We try to do it in a constructive way," Mr. Vaillancourt said.

The food at Shiraz was indeed good, and the service was indeed friendly. It's traditional fare, with kebabs of all sorts complemented by rice, citrusy tabbouleh and spot-on stuffed grape leaves. Ms. Dufault's husband, Scott Erb, widened his eyes as his gyro plate slid in front of him, healthy slabs of ground meat with a bright dollop of tzatziki on the side.

Nadia McGourthy was on her second expedition with the group, and said she has been having fun. She suspects that she was brought along because her dietary limitations make her a tough customer.

"Sometimes I'll just ask if they can cook me something off the menu," she said. "Or I'll ask if I can make a substitution. Most places have some sort of chicken dish I can have."

But the simply prepared dishes at Shiraz afforded her the opportunity to pick from the menu. She went with the eggplant kebabs, and wasn't disappointed.

"Eggplant is a good test of a restaurant," Ms. McGourthy said. "If they do it right, it's perfect, but you can really screw it up. This is good."

Ms. McGourthy said she just wanted to come along to try something new, a sentiment that elicited mouths-full nods from other members of the group.

The WorcesterFoodies group knew not to dig in right away after the salads were removed and replaced with the entrées.

Armed with a hefty-looking digital camera (with a new lens to shoot better photos in low light situations), Mr. Vaillancourt hurried from place setting to place setting, snapping pictures.

"Once I take the picture, you can eat," he said.

The cards the diners have with them are simple — they have to describe the dish as it appears on the menu, and they have to write a short review. That's about it. The rest is just people enjoying a meal, Mr. Vaillancourt said. Mr. Dion said it's the total experience he enjoys.



Julie Valois jokes with fellow foodies about her adding more salt to her meal. (MATT WRIGHT)
[Enlarge photo](#)



The Worcester Foodies meet once a month to review Worcester area restaurants. They are seated at Shiraz Armenian Restaurant on Park Avenue in Worcester. (MATT WRIGHT)
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"The people here always make the food better," he said. "We always have a good time."

It's Ms. Dufault's turn to pick the next restaurant at which the group will eat. She said she's torn between Baba Sushi on Park Avenue, Joey's Bar and Grill, which was on Mill Street but is opening soon on Chandler Street, and Hirosaki Prime on Grafton Street. The size of the group can be prohibitive, Mr. Vaillancourt said. He always calls ahead. Being unable to cram the group into smaller eateries means some gems will go unreviewed.

The group initially had a strict policy of having everyone order something different off the menu to get a broader review of the restaurants.

Ms. Vaillancourt said her position at the table would sometimes lead her to try food she's never had before.

"Where you sit matters," she said. "I've ordered by default a million things I never would have tried."

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