

# Normal's Swingers Grille a nifty cross between sports bar, country club

LYNDA ZIMMER

June 21, 2007

NORMAL - A colleague steered me to Swingers Grille on the west side of Normal. The name comes from its inclusion in the All Seasons Entertainment Center, downstairs from The Golf Learning Center. Just 1-year-old, it is quite convenient to those who:

- \* Attend events at the Interstate Center, such as Third Sunday at the Market.
- \* Want to escape crowded places after a downtown Bloomington event.
- \* Want to avoid the construction in uptown Normal after a program there or at one of the local colleges.

My husband went along kind of grudgingly, since he's not a sports bar kind of guy. He even ordered something other than his favorite he-man steak because he was so sure the food might be mediocre.

Imagine his surprise when his \$17.95 lobster ravioli arrived in black-striped pasta pockets, covered with a rich cream sauce, topped with tiger shrimp and sun-dried tomatoes and garnished with an orchid. It tasted good, too.

But this is no ordinary sports bar menu. There is prime rib, duck breast, crab-stuffed shrimp with smoked Gouda cheese, sushi-grade orange ginger tuna and six vegetarian and/or pasta entrees. Creme brulee is one of the dessert choices.

Since he was out of character, ordering pasta, I ordered the \$18.95 peppercorn-encrusted top sirloin. I don't think I've had a center-cut sirloin before. It was superb, cooked medium rare as ordered, without one speck of fat or gristle waste. Besides the peppercorns, it had a wine and cognac sauce. There also were fresh thyme sprigs and three small carrots on my plate.

It came on a trendy, square plate that turned into a spout directing meat juice into my lap when the waitress served it.

But I'm way ahead of myself.

The location is a nice mix between country club and sports bar atmosphere. A large, square bar fills the center of the dining room, but there also are lots of high and low tables and booths surrounding it. Some of the tables have their own television sets tuned to sports stations.

Hot rolls with regular and honey-flavored butter arrived on our table immediately.

I ordered a virgin Mary that was just as I like it - seasoned salt around the rim, a celery stick and a skewer with a green olive and small pickle - an appetizer in itself.

We ordered the potato-wrapped buffalo shrimp as a starter and enjoyed the crunchy texture and great, slightly hot flavor. The shrimp were wrapped in shoestring potatoes that looked like spaghetti. Blue cheese dipping sauce came on the side. It cost \$7.95 and with six pieces would make a small entree.

Our thick balsamic vinegar salad dressings also came on the side of salads with a nice mixture of greens, purple onion, cherry tomatoes, cucumber slices and croutons.

The entrees came with a wide choice of potatoes - white truffle mashed, twice-baked, roasted Yukon gold, seasoned wedge steak fries. I had the fluffy mashed ones.

My husband wanted the rice pilaf even though pasta dishes do not include another starch. The waitress cheerfully brought it without charge, but it was not worth the special request. It tasted like plain rice boiled in chlorinated water.

We could not resist a specialty of the house dessert - four large fresh strawberries dipped in milk and white

chocolate and infused with amaretto cream - absolutely decadent for \$6.

Our meal for two came to \$62 before tip. We did not need the three courses, but enjoyed it all.

Monday through Wednesday, you may order a \$34.95 dinner for two that includes a shared appetizer and dessert and two entrees from among several selections.

The lunch menu includes soups, salads and sandwiches with combos, fish, pasta and steak burgers for \$5.49 to \$9.95. Soups and specialty salads also are available during dinner hours.

The midday Sunday brunch costs \$12.95 with a discount to \$4.95 for children younger than 12. Brunch bloody Marys or mimosas are three for \$10.

Liquor choices are extensive: five pages of wine at \$5 to \$10 a glass, \$12 to \$1,000 a bottle; martinis for \$5.50 to \$6.50; beer for \$2.75 to \$8; specialty drinks; and even champagne by the glass.

Other reviewers and my colleague also rave about great jazz music at the place. It starts at 7 p.m. Friday and Saturday nights.

Take Interstate 74 to the 160 exit. Turn left on Martin Luther King Drive, drive through an industrial park, then turn left again on Cross Creek Drive, and it's straight ahead.

Lynda Zimmer visits restaurants anonymously and unannounced. The News-Gazette pays for all meals and does not accept invitations to do a review.

## SWINGERS GRILLE

1304 Cross Creek Drive, Normal

309-829-5777

Hours: Meals available 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Sunday buffet brunch, regular meals, 3 to 10 p.m. Sunday. Bar open until 1 a.m. weekdays and 2 a.m. Saturday and Sunday.

Credit cards: American Express, Diners Club, Discover, MasterCard and Visa.

Reservations: Taken for any number, recommended for 10 or more.

Smoking: Outdoors on the patio.

Handicapped-accessible: Yes, elevator to dining level.

On the Web: [www.swingersgrille.com](http://www.swingersgrille.com).