

Hen House Eatery rules the roost

Wednesday, April 30, 2014 by

Bridgette Reinsmoen

in

Food & Drink

It can't be easy stepping into the shoes vacated by a nearly century-old institution. Peter's Grill had been operating in downtown Minneapolis for 99 years when it closed last summer, and this March, the new Hen House Eatery opened in its place on Eighth Street between Marquette and Second.

The three new owners — restaurant vets Maribel Cuandros Perrault, Barb Gardiner, and Tara Koenig, all formerly of Keys Cafe — aren't serving anything too far afield from the diner classics that Peter's customers enjoyed, but they have placed a new emphasis on local ingredients in their menu design (Chicken and eggs, for example, are from Larry Schultz Organic Farm). They've also spruced the place up with yellow, orange, and green paint that makes the room cheery and complements the dark wood booths, and added homey touches like chalkboards and black-and-white photos of old rural scenes. The spacious room has retained the counter seating, perfect for solo diners, and there's also a pastry case stocked with house-made goodies like the brick-size Mars Bar, with a crumbly graham cracker crust, sweet coconut middle, and thick chocolate topping.

There's a definite emphasis on breakfast at Hen House – it's available all day, which is from 6:30 a.m. to 8 p.m. on weekdays (with happy hour from 2 to 7), 7 to 3 on Saturdays, and 7:30 to 3 on Sundays. The menu is stocked with perfectly serviceable standbys like two eggs and toast plus a choice of meat, Eggs Benedict, pancakes, and waffles. Three breakfast sandwiches are offered; the version with bacon, egg, avocado, and tomato arrived on toasted wheat bread with thick-cut bacon and made for a delicious combination, though the avocado could have been a little riper. A waffle was light and crispy on the outside with a chewy interior, accompanied by plenty of sweet fresh blueberries and strawberries and a generous helping of buoyant whipped cream. Biscuits and sausage gravy came with two eggs cooked to order and had all the right salty, rich flavor notes, with many big chunks of sausage.

A Kitchen Sink Omelet had as many ingredients as that name implies crammed into its thin egg casing: Italian sausage, bacon, ham, cheddar, green onions, tomatoes, bell peppers, and hash browns. It was a monster and didn't disappoint. Most egg dishes are accompanied by multigrain toast with delicious homemade jam, and a few come with crispy fried hash browns. There's also a side called Hen Potatoes, which is sweet potatoes with red onion and thyme, and while the option of a slightly healthier breakfast potato is welcome, the herb flavor was overpowering.

Chicken and waffle dishes seem to be everywhere these days, and Hen House Eatery is no exception. This version was topped with honey, which added the perfect sweet notes, almost enough to not require maple syrup (but not quite). It also came with a great apple coleslaw, which would have been appreciated more on the side of the plate, rather than layered between the waffle and the breaded and fried chicken cutlets. Diners with a sweet tooth will find no shortage of temptations here: Along with French toast and giant cinnamon and caramel rolls (get the latter early before they're gone), there are cinnamon roll pancakes, with swirled ribbons of the super-sweet concoction threaded into the cakes. They were crowd-pleasing, but it wouldn't be a bad idea to visit a dentist after finishing off a plate.

On our breakfast visits none of us could bring ourselves to order from the "Healthy" section of the menu, but there is one, with choices including yogurt and berries, oatmeal, fruit plates, and granola. There's also a section called "El Matador Corner," which features two Mexican-inspired breakfast dishes. The Ranchero Tostadas was one of the most flavorful meals we sampled, with corn tortillas, refried black beans, queso fresco, eggs, avocado, and cilantro, served with a peppery house-made salsa and hash browns.

The lunch side of the Hen House menu is made up mostly of salads and sandwiches. A club sandwich, Reuben or Rachel, BLT, and French dip all make appearances, along with a turkey panini and the Cubano, which was a little skimpy on the pickles but perfectly grilled and stuffed with delectable, moist pulled pork plus ham and Swiss. Sweet potato fries had just the right texture and retained the root vegetable's flavor better than the breakfast version. There are several grilled cheeses and melts, plus macaroni and cheese with the option to add bacon and tomatoes.

The menu features a number of variations on beef burgers: salmon, turkey, and veggie versions. A bison burger was expertly prepared – buffalo meat has less fat than beef and is easy to overcook, but here was a bit pink in the middle and very juicy. It was topped with pepper jack cheese and jalapeño mayo, but the spicy pepper flavors were muted and mild, and failed to deliver the expected kick.

All the typical diner salads are here: a taco, a Cobb, a spinach, a garden. The Garlic Parmesan Chicken Salad included black olives, tomatoes, cucumber, green onions, and sunflower seeds, and was topped with a light, lemony, garlicky, Caesar-like dressing (there's also, of course, a classic Caesar on the menu).

When Peter's Grill closed, the owner cited competition from food trucks as a big reason for his restaurant's declining business. Hen House Eatery will still have to contend with that issue, but this place does have one thing the trucks don't: alcoholic drinks. There's a full bar and some especially fun breakfast cocktails. For leisurely brunches, there's the Red Eye Rooster, one of those Bloody Marys that's a meal in itself, with house-made mix and sriracha vodka plus a pickle, meat stick, celery, cheese, and a whole hard-boiled egg. The Breakfast of Champions, a combination of Crown Maple, Jagermeister, bitters, and fresh-squeezed orange juice topped with a slice of bacon, tasted a lot better than that description sounds, with the sweet, sour, and medicinal flavors complementing each other. Irish coffee has the traditional Jameson plus Kahlua and whipped cream, and the Paloma, with Don Julio Blanco tequila, fresh-squeezed grapefruit juice, soda, and lime, makes a refreshing eye-opener. The Peach Ginger Bellini was a light, bubbly treat, and the Cinnamon Toast Shot with Bailey's plus cinnamon and butterscotch schnapps was a perfect liquid dessert.

Hen House Eatery is nothing to blow the minds of foodies, but this new downtown diner is ideal for lunches with co-workers, breakfast with family, and casual weekend brunches with friends. Service was always friendly and just attentive enough. Whether Hen House will have the longevity of Peter's Grill remains to be seen, but it's a worthy successor. And as much as we love the food trucks, we can't count on them to feed us all winter.