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MEL'S HARD LUCK DINER »

50s-themed diner is laden with talent, food

Nobody leaves Mel's Hard Luck Diner in Branson feeling hungry.

By Kim W. Schumer
For the News-Leader

Larry Ewing knows Branson inside and out. Semi-retired, Larry says his occupation now is "to just enjoy life." He has seen most of the shows and has eaten at nearly every restaurant in the 65616 ZIP code, and the Hard Luck Diner is, far and away, his favorite. "I like to scoot around and find those little hidden gems, and this really is one of them," Larry says.

Larry's take

By his own admission, Larry eats at the Hard Luck Diner "two or three times a week. The food is really nice, very generous portions. I like the mushroom and Swiss burger, but the Reuben is really my favorite. It's one of those you have to get a to-go box for."

It's not just the food that has Larry coming back: "I enjoy the entertainment; the waiters are super talents. The kids have either been in a show, are in a show now or hope to be in one. You see some awesome talent," Larry says.

That's because at the Hard Luck Diner, singing servers is the theme. The wait staff, all aspiring celebrities, stops in the middle of waiting tables to grab a mic and show off their vocal chops.

Kim's turn

After speaking with Larry to arrange our lunch date, I admit I was skeptical. Yes, he was very enthusiastic about how talented the servers are at the Hard Luck Diner, but entertainment is Branson's bread and butter. You expect to be entertained here. I'm not as interested in a server who can carry a tune as much as one who can carry a big plate of food.

I met Larry for lunch, and, upon entering the diner, was immediately swept up in the playfulness of the place. Like every staffer, the hostess was dressed the part, from her bouncy ponytail to her flouncy poodle skirt. She positively beamed as she whisked us to our table, saddle shoes tapping along the tiled floor.

The Hard Luck Diner is true to the style of a 1950s diner, with soft pink walls, neon signs, an old-time soda fountain and plenty of memorabilia sprinkled throughout.

Autographed photographs and gold records from such musical icons as Patsy Cline and Elvis adorn the walls alongside hand-written "hard luck" stories donated by present-day performers and the ubiquitous Route 66 road signs and Coca-Cola advertisements.

The '50s fun continues in the menu, with foods named after songs we all know by heart: The Cheese Release Me grilled cheese sandwich, the Love Me Tender fried steak, the Blue Suede Salad and the Tutti-Frutti fruit plate were just a few of the items that had me giggling.

I opted for the Smoke Gets In Your Eyes cheeseburger (\$9), and Larry ordered the Romeo Reuben (\$8). The sandwiches are served with batter-dipped fries so light and airy, they float into your mouth.

My cheeseburger was a monster, topped with several slices of smoked bacon, smoked cheddar cheese, lettuce, onions, pickles and tomato. It also came with a side of barbecue sauce, which I tried on half of the burger. It didn't need the sauce; the burger was unbelievably good with just standard ketchup and mustard.

Larry's Romeo Reuben boasted piles of corned beef blanketed in Swiss cheese and sauerkraut on rye. He gamely attacked the mountainous sandwich, but was forced to surrender after finishing only half.

Since no visit to a 1950s-themed diner is complete without something from the soda fountain, we decided on a Build Me Up, Banana Cup banana split (\$7) for dessert. The split was delicious, and big. We dove in determinedly, but couldn't finish it. Exhausted from the effort, Larry laid down his spoon and remarked that "we needed two or three more in our party to eat that."

After dessert, we lingered a bit, partly to hear a lovely rendition of "Some Enchanted Evening," and partly because we couldn't heft ourselves out of the booth. I don't have much of an appetite for kitsch, but I'll be back for a seconds of the Hard Luck Diner.

The Dish, restaurant

Anita Harmon has been the manager of the diner for 13 years. She says the popularity of the eatery is due mostly to word-of-mouth.

"Everyone enjoys the entertainment," Anita says, "and we have good food."

She says the Romeo Reuben is one of the most popular items the restaurant serves.

"We have comments on a regular basis that it is one of the best in the U.S.," Anita says. "We are very proud of that one."

When I mention the size of the Build Me Up, Banana Cup, she laughs.

"What a banana split, huh?" she says. "It is always fun to watch people's eyes when you take that to the table."
