

EXECUTIVE DINING

Chop house serves up juicy departure from Italian

BY HBJ GOURMET
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If not one but two restaurants that focused on fish didn't last very long in a certain location, maybe a new tenant could go the distance by broadening the base.

That may have been Frank Crapitto's thinking when he took over the Westheimer at Westgrove Lane space formerly occupied by the Rockfish Seafood Grill and Joyce's Ocean Grill. It was a Stables Steak House before that. The redirection appears to have paid off, since Frank's Chop House seems to be doing very good business. Half-price on all bottles of wine surely helps boost the Sunday trade.

Crapitto's new operation is a big departure from the eponymous Crapitto's Cucina Italiana. The menu developed by another Frank who has long been associated with Italian food in Houston — founding chef Frank Butera — is grounded in comparatively high-end homestyle cooking. At lunchtime you can even get a foot-long hot dog. Granted, it's topped with chili made with sirloin and spiked with chipotle and ancho chiles, but comfort food doesn't get much more basic than what's essentially ballpark or carnival fare.

But as much as I like a good red hot now and then, there were so many other tempting things to be had that I couldn't bring myself to settle for a hot dog, no matter how deluxe.

Two of Frank's Chop House's signature dishes are iconic Texas entrées, and both



FRED LOWERY/HBJ

Frank's Chop House's chicken-fried steak earned its place on the daily menu.

of them became so popular as only occasional offerings that they were added to the daily menu.

Number 56 on former Houston Press restaurant critic Robb Walsh's list of 100 favorite dishes in Houston, the chicken-fried steak is a blue-ribbon combination of tender meat and crackly crust. The mashed potatoes are also exemplary, and, if fried okra were on the plate instead of roasted cubes of carrot, zucchini and yellow squash, the dish would have been the pride of any country diner.

The same can be said of the hefty pair of spare ribs I had as an appetizer. Smoked over pecan and hickory woods, they were accompanied by a dab of lightly dressed cole slaw and some hot-sweet barbecue sauce.

Likewise, the fried chicken is Sunday-

supper ready. Soaked in buttermilk like it was in the long-gone, much-lamented Fox Diner, it too is embraced by just enough crisp breading. Surprisingly, my bird didn't come with peppered cream gravy, but a small biscuit and a slice of spiced peach were welcome Southern touches.

The shrimp campechana was a tasty nod to Tex-Mex cuisine, but two other dishes I sampled as appetizers were celebrations of Crapitto's heritage. The Parmesan soufflé overflowed with the pungency of that classic Italian cheese, and the Bolognese pasta packed lots of flavor, too. A blend of beef and pork, the rich tomato-cream meat sauce was as thick as chili, and it boasted some vodka-sauce richness.

Parmesan made a more discreet appearance in the breadcrumbs coating the

filet of black drum. The fish was expertly cooked, and the Key lime butter sauce was a luxurious alternative to a simple squirt of lemon juice.

Harking back to the site's days as a Stables, Frank's Chop House serves a variety of steaks. But, as befits the name, it also offers lamb chops, a veal chop and a pork chop. My outstanding helping of the latter was a double-bone two-incher marinated in a maple-laced brine that imparted just a hint of sweetness as it made the meat more moist and tender. Garlic-spiked sautéed spinach came alongside, as well as a heap of mashed potatoes inexplicably but enjoyably studded with kernels of corn.

White-chocolate bread pudding was such a favorite at Joyce's Ocean Grill that Frank's Chop House makes it, too. But for down-home culinary nostalgia, it would be hard to beat this attractive restaurant's fudgy chocolate sheet cake with pecan icing. ■

FRANK'S CHOP HOUSE

RATING: (Treat yourself)

FOOD: Mostly American

ATMOSPHERE: Laid back

SERVICE: Attentive

LOCATION: 3736 Westheimer

HOURS: 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Friday, 5 to 11 p.m. Saturday, 5 to 9 p.m. Sunday

PHONE: 713-572-8600

WEBSITE: frankschophouse.com