



Kelly provides service with a smile at Of Grape and Grain on Oakway.

Sweet & Savory

Good enough to eat off the floor.

OF GRAPE & GRAIN

160 Oakway Road., inside Reed & Cross.
344-9463
Willamette & 29th. 686-9463

So — friend Jacquelyn and I head out for lunch hitting Of Grape & Grain Neighborhood Café, the one hidden in a lovely, sunny spot at the back of Reed & Cross on Oakway Road.

The hidden-ness of the place is pretty cool. Reed & Cross is such a sparkly, colorful, potpourri-scented labyrinth, you feel like Alice in Wonderland when you happen upon the café. Of Grape & Grain has plenty of seating and is warmly decorated with lots of artwork — original paintings, prints, little doodads and tchotchkes. One side of the café has windows looking out onto the greenhouse-style gardening section of Reed & Cross — the amount of natural light coming through is impressive.

The deli counter displays a variety of fresh salads and sandwich fillings; just past the cashier is another display case full of dessert. For lunch, I order Chicken Caesar Salad (\$7.95) and Jacquelyn orders Brie & Tomato Sandwich (\$6.95), which comes on a toasted baguette with pesto aioli and a side of potato chips and fruit.

We move along the line and at the register, with all those sweets calling out to us, we decide to order two to share — one Hot Fudge Cake (\$2.50), a single-serving, tin-can sized chocolate cake with a hot fudge center, served with whipped cream; and a Raspberry Cordial (\$1.50), kind of a cookie bar: crisp, buttery crust topped by a rich, dense chocolate filling spiked with nuts and, as Jacquelyn describes it, “the perfect hint of raspberry.”

The one prickly thing about the café’s layout is there gets to be a log jam at the order counter and cash register if there are a lot of people waiting, or if things get bogged down at the register: Say the cashier has to pitch in by fixing a fresh pot of coffee; this can hold up those customers paying, which in turn holds up those ordering, which in turn holds up those waiting to order. Of Grape & Grain, though, is not the only eatery contending with such traffic issues (think Broadway Deli downtown).

Anyway, the server preps desserts for us

to take to our table while we wait for the entrees. And, well, there is just no way to resist two chocolate desserts when they’re sitting there in front of you. We try to be polite, try to make small talk over the two cakes while looking over our shoulders for the entrees, but it’s no use. “Oh, let’s just taste them,” I say. Jacquelyn takes a half-forkful of the Raspberry Cordial and intones, “Oh, my goooosh.” I make for the Hot Fudge Cake and nearly forget about the entrees altogether. This cake is lighter and more tender than some of the very dense versions I’ve tried before, and the middle is like chocolate pudding. With the whipped cream, it’s a most glorious collision of brownie and cake and pudding and chocolate sundae.

The waitress arrives with the entrees, smiling and chiding us, “Dessert first! Uh-oh ...” We look a little embarrassed, but only a little — those desserts are worth the breach of etiquette.

Maybe because we dive into the sweets first and are so transported, the savories leave a couple of things to be desired. My Chicken Caesar arrives with plenty of flavor — nice, tangy dressing, generous sprinkling of parmesan and croutons, lots of tender, seasoned chicken breast, a nice hunk of French bread with butter. But, there are more than a couple of wilted, brown-edged greens in the mix, as well as a couple of bites where the dressing is glopped pretty thickly. Jacquelyn enjoys her sandwich, saying the brie is just right — “not too runny” — but that it could have used a little more flavor, maybe a fresher tomato or more oomph in the pesto aioli topping. Nonetheless, we lunch happily, keeping an eye on what’s left of those desserts.

When we finish the entrees and revisit the sweets, it is without out any etiquette guilt. At one point when a bite of the Raspberry Cordial’s crispy crust snaps, causing a morsel to jump from the plate and fall to the floor, Jacquelyn reaches over (within the 3-second safe time), picks it up, blows it off and pops it into her mouth. “I don’t care,” she says. “It’s that good.” Yeah, I’d have done the same — it is that good.

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