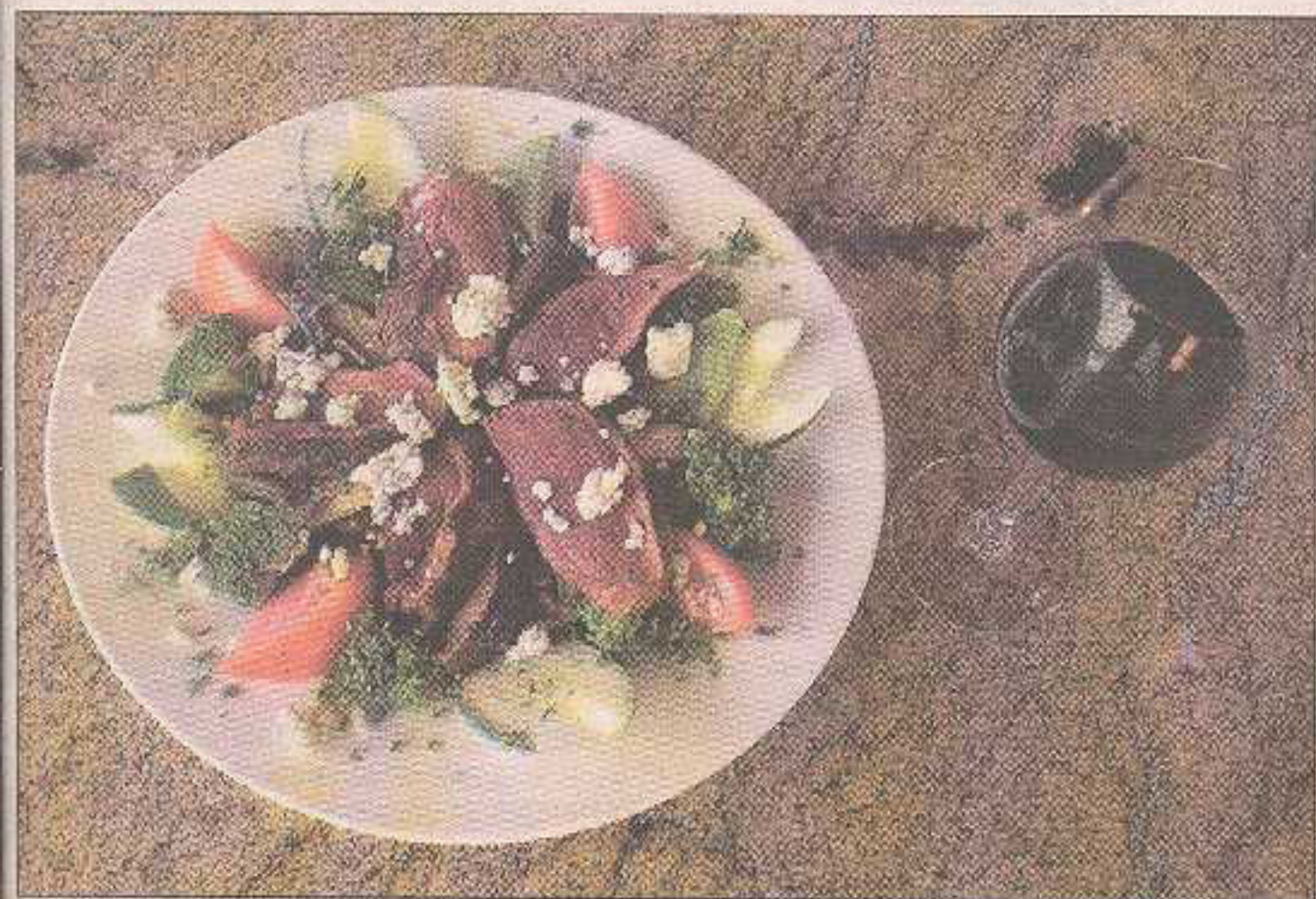


Is the sequel the equal?

Warning: You may have to stand in line for tickets. ■ By Brian Ries



JONATHAN MAZUR

Word of Mouth Limited offers a Warm Gorgonzola Steak Salad at both lunch and dinner. The dish features tenderloin steak, romaine, olives, marinated tomatoes, sautéed mushrooms and broccoli drizzled with roasted shallot vinaigrette.

Word of Mouth Limited ★★
711 S. Osprey Ave., Sarasota, 365-1600.

Chain restaurants are supposed to be clones of a carefully constructed corporate marketing image, stamped into suburban strip malls based on complicated demographic statistics and traffic pattern research. But when a local joint decides to expand, the process is a bit more organic. Instead of clones, these extra locations often fall more in line with television spin-offs or movie sequels.

And, unless we're talking about *Empire Strikes Back* or *Frasier*, the second go around is never as impressive as the first try.

Two years ago, local breakfast fave Word Of Mouth decided to extend its reach beyond Gulf Gate and open up a place out by the interstate, on Cattlemen Road. The food was almost as good, but the space was a cramped and charmless slice of strip mall, without the engaging personality of owner/impresario Jeremy Adams manning the front door. No matter, WoM 2 still packed them in, so Adams started looking for a new script. Then Metro closed, and he started eying that oddly shaped space on the edge of downtown. Within a few weeks he'd closed a deal and opened the doors on WoM 3.

Actually, he's calling it Word of Mouth Limited, in spite of an expanded menu that includes dinner — a first for the WoM franchise — and just about as extensive a breakfast and lunch offering as the other two locations. The "limited" part comes in when you get a look at the kitchen. The place is tiny. It's difficult to imagine cooking a dinner for four in

that wee little hotbox, let alone manage a Sunday breakfast rush. And, after a few visits during peak hours, it's obvious that even the experienced WoM staff can't make that little kitchen perform beyond its capacity.

That means that during lunch rush and most of the morning on Saturday and Sunday, you'll be waiting for your food. As much as an hour or more after ordering, in my experience. That's a bit galling when all you want is a cheese omelet with a side of fruit.

The rest of the time, though, you'll find breakfast and lunch to be the typical WoM experience, diluted a bit from the original but still one of the better options. The chefs in that postage stamp kitchen know what they're doing with eggs, whether over easy or folded into an omelet. Corned beef hash is made in house, as is the peppery sausage gravy ladled over biscuits. The veggies are always fresh and the fruit cup is still one of the best in town, with no under-ripe cantaloupe or honeydew to act as mealy filler.

Pancakes are huge, fluffy and, if you choose the buckwheat version (*always* choose the buckwheat version), hearty enough to fill you up even before you add in sides and extras. French toast is the pancakes' equal, and there is still a variety of fresh-baked goodies like scones and muffins, although those have become more pedestrian as WoM has opened more outlets.

For lunch, sandwiches are the best bet, although the superb, fresh-roasted turkey has gone the way

of the dodo. What's left is fruity and fine chicken salad, sliced meats, mediocre fish, grilled chicken, curried egg salad and a killer grilled cheese lined with slices of tomato and a bunch of bacon. Salads are what you'd expect, fresh and topped with good cheese and protein, but soups are — and mostly always have been — an adventure in bland.

When I talked to Adams before the place opened, he promised simple food. "It'll be more home-style cooking, you know, like organic free-range roasted half chickens, meatloaf, turkey dinner," he told me. For WoM regulars like me, that was the draw for the new spot.

Half the menu is taken almost straight off the lunch section — sandwiches and salads that work just as well at dusk as they do at noon. The rest of the nighttime offerings, though, need some time before they're perfected.

A cornbread appetizer comes out the consistency of chalk and just as dry, while quesadillas are innocuous wedges of cheese and chicken. WoM's meatloaf suffers from several pitfalls that plague the sliced meat of my youth — flavor and texture seems to come more from breadcrumbs than meat and spice.

Roast chicken held my biggest hope for adding another meal to my WoM repertoire, but it is also the biggest disappointment. Although the chicken is cooked just about right, the skin is rubbery and flavorless, leaving the meat washed in an unpleasant schmear of unseasoned schmaltz.

Maybe they need a few years to bring their third-meal skills up to their impressive breakfast and lunch chops. I'm sure that Adams and crew have the tenacity to do it. And he's already working on that tiny kitchen. Apparently, the cooking area is big enough, but they don't have enough room to prep all the food they need for the busy times, leaving them scrambling to do things during service that — in a normal-sized kitchen — could have been done before the restaurant opened its doors. He's trying to lease a few square feet from the neighbors to add in more coolers and prep space.

In the meantime, though, WoM 3 deserves a mixed review. During the weekdays, when things are quiet, before the dinner menu clicks in, it's a worthy sequel to the original, providing almost the same experience in a great space that may be closer to where you live or work.

At night, or during a rush, it pales in comparison to the original. Think *Phantom Menace*, with a side of bacon.

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