



March 3, 2011

Huntsville's Red Lobster stands the test of time



Huntsville
Times

Red Lobster's Ultimate
Feast.

HUNTSVILLE, AL -- The Huntsville location of Red Lobster has been open since 1975, while plenty of other restaurants have come and gone. There's almost always a wait for a table. People celebrate birthdays there. They're obviously doing something right.

The chain began in Lakeland, Fla., in 1968, and became "the place that introduced America to seafood," according to restaurant chain spokeswoman Erica Jaeger.

If you haven't been there in a while and remember it just as a place to get a fried-shrimp platter, you'll be surprised how the menu has changed through the years - for the better.

Several years ago, the restaurants began a "refresh initiative," Jaeger said. In 2006, they added a selection of the day's fresh fish, with recommendations from the local managers.

Two years later, they added wood-fired grills in all their kitchens to offer oak-grilled selections. This year, they're introducing new, lower priced items.

The next initiative will be for a redesign, she said, where the Huntsville restaurant will get a makeover over in the next three or four years. Look for stone towers, Adirondack chairs, dark-wood paneling, a bar with granite countertops and flat-screen TVs.

The menu additions and experimentations certainly have helped, especially when other local restaurants have raised the bar on fresh seafood dishes.

You can still order Walt's Favorite Shrimp with butterflied breaded shrimp for \$13.50. But there's also peach-bourbon barbecue shrimp and bacon-wrapped sea scallops for \$15.99.

The kids can get popcorn shrimp for \$10.25. Mom can try wood-grilled maple-cherry glaze and skewered jumbo shrimp over rice for \$16.50. Dad can even order a steak.

The \$8.99-\$18.50 "tastes of America" menu features cedar plank salmon, parmesan-crusting tilapia, pecan-crusting shrimp, New England lobster rolls, shrimp flatbread and more.

For lunch, a quick-catches menu starts at \$6.99. Lobster rolls appear to be lobster salad served on a bun. Shrimp flatbread comes with grilled shrimp salad. Salad with grilled shrimp and soup in a sourdough bread bowl is \$8.99.

The wood grilling is a definite improvement - it gave the salmon on my \$19.99 three-choice combination platter fish a nice smoky edge, but they need to watch the timing and not overcook it. Steamed snow crab legs are always a fine choice there - too bad you have to eat a ton to fill up. The seafood-stuffed flounder was good too, with actual recognizable seafood in the stuffing.

The new crispy Creole flounder, topped with shrimp, tomatoes, onions, peppers and andouille sausage over wild rice was a surprisingly good choice and a value for \$12.25.

Try the bacon-wrapped scallops, too, and especially the lobster, crab and seafood-stuffed mushrooms as a \$7.99 appetizer.

As for the burning question: When is Huntsville getting another Red Lobster?

The spokesperson says they're constantly evaluating the need, but it's "too soon to tell." Better settle in for a wait.

Recommendations: Crispy Creole flounder, stuffed mushrooms, and those great little cheddar biscuits

Improvements: Build another location

Ambiance: Family dining

Service: Can be hit-or-miss

Alcoholic beverages: Full bar

Vegetarian-friendly: Not really, unless you eat fish

Smoking: No

Price range: Entrees \$10.25 to market price for fresh fish

Parking: Free in the parking lot, but it's dark back there

1818 University Drive

Sunday-Thursday: 11 a.m.-10 p.m.

Friday: 11 a.m.-11 p.m.

Saturday: 11 a.m.-11 p.m.

256-533-2880

www.redlobster.com

FOOD: B-plus

SERVICE: B

OVERALL: B-plus