

# Drink up, eat well in Conway

*Alcohol aside, Mike's Place offers a great eating experience.*

■ CONWAY — Maybe our priorities are out of order, but if we lived in a dry county, we'd accept mediocre food at a restaurant if we got to order a glass of wine to go with it.

We'd certainly not quibble over decor.

So our experience at Mike's Place, the newly opened Conway restaurant that's one of only two in the city serving alcohol, was a pleasant surprise.

The 10,000-square-foot restaurant, actually owned by two guys named Mike, is in a renovated building on the city's Toad Suck Square that the owners believe is 99 years old. They've done a fantastic rehab job, starting with the wrought-iron scrollwork on the building's front wall. The interior is a soaring space with no ceiling, but architectural features like arches and panels of copper tiles suspended from wood beams create the illusion of more regular proportions. There's lots of gorgeous wood and exposed brick and more wrought iron — all meant to evoke New Orleans.

On our visit, a hostess met us as we came through the door and walked us through the membership process — you give them a driver's license and \$50, they give you a membership card and a \$45 gift certificate, which should at least take care of most of a dinner for two.

The restaurant opened June 8; we visited exactly three weeks later and got membership card number 2607. We took that as a good sign — although as we said earlier, the wine alone would get us through the door in a dry county.

The menu at Mike's Place is about as big as the restaurant. It's heavy on New Orleans-inspired seafood, although there are several steak and chicken selections as well as wood-fired pizzas, salads and sandwiches to choose from. The wine list isn't lengthy, but it's varied and has enough familiar labels to not be intimidating.

Although we'd heard good things about the zucchini "planks," we started with an order of spinach-artichoke dip (\$6.50) and a glass of Kendall Jackson chardonnay (\$7). The dip wasn't as cheesy or creamy as we've had at other restaurants, but it didn't matter as much as you'd think. We wouldn't order it again unless we were with a larger group, but only because we didn't have nearly enough room left for what came next.

Mike's Place has a "platter" option, which comes with smaller portions of two entrees and two sides (\$13.95). Our companion went this route, sampling crawfish etoufee and blackened chicken "alfredeaux," with sides of fries and steamed vegetables. He stuck with Newcastle ale to drink, and was pleasantly



BEVAN CHILLI SON

**A SLICE OF BREAD, A GLASS OF PINOT NOIR:** Mike's Place offers both.

surprised to get a "non-skunky" bottle — a rarity in Central Arkansas, he said.

He would have liked more spice in the etoufee, but said the chicken alfredeaux was exactly what he wanted it to be. The steamed veggies were cooked just the right amount — not at all soggy.

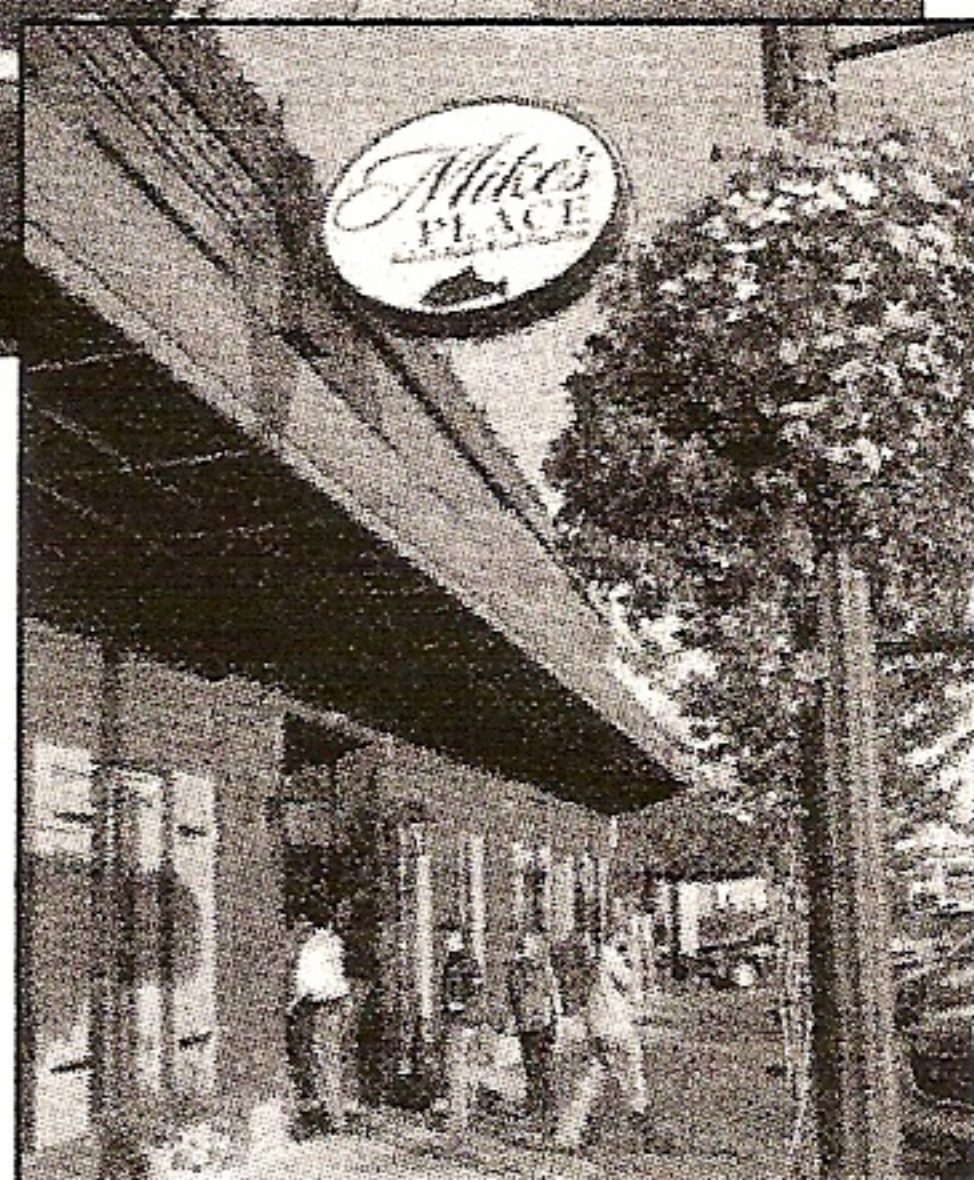
We chose the pecan-encrusted grouper fillet, drizzled with a raspberry bordelaise sauce, with sides of sweet-potato fries and red beans and rice, and a glass of Villa Maria sauvignon blanc (\$7). The grouper was fantastic, although we wouldn't have minded a little more pecan-encrusting. The raspberry sauce was light and sweet, and just the right amount — more would have been too sweet.

As for the sweet-potato fries, they were perfect. Crisp and a little salty on the outside, soft and sweet in the middle. We've rarely met a sweet potato we didn't like, but these fries truly were outstanding. We'd go back just for them.

And we didn't plan it this way, but the spicy red beans and rice were just the balance the meal needed. We kicked ourselves for eating so much spinach dip we could barely get through half our entree.

Both wine selections were good as well, although next time we'd pair the bright sauvignon blanc with the appetizer and save the richer chardonnay for the main course. And we were very pleased that our waiter at least knew enough about the wines to offer some basic information when we asked.

We abandoned our original plan to order two desserts, and shared a Streetcar Slide (\$5.50), the Mikes' take on the brownie/ice cream staple. Theirs comes with a dark chocolate cake rather than a brownie. The



cake was a little on the dry side, but we loved the dark-chocolate flavor, and the ice cream added plenty of moisture back in the mix.

Mike's Place is one of those restaurants where the bill can be as large or small as you care to make it: Pizzas and sandwiches are under \$10, and most entrees are around \$15, although a few top \$20. There's also a "light fare" menu, selected entrees that are available in smaller portions with one side for \$6.50.

Our bill for one appetizer, two entrees, one dessert and four drinks came to \$65 with tax. And by the time we left, we were already talking about coming back. 🍷

**Mike's Place**  
 ★★★★★  
 808 Front St.  
 Conway  
 501-269-6453

**Quick bite**  
 Reservations aren't a bad idea. Don't miss the sweet potato fries, and save room for dessert.

**Hours**  
 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday through Thursday (last seating at 9 p.m.), 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday (last seating at 10 p.m.).

**Other information**  
 Moderate to expensive prices. Credit cards accepted. Full bar; no alcohol served before 5 p.m. on Sundays.