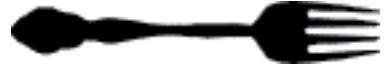


Portage Park Palates *Jill & Jan*



I'm thrilled that Crave's Café finally opened at 4431 N. Milwaukee. Actually, thrilled isn't the word I'm looking for....I'm Ecstatic!!!! **Craves Café** opened a few weeks ago after teasing us for a month or two that they were opening. I finally called them to see if they were open, and Tara, one of the owners called me back. They invited us to the soft opening party the next night, and they told us to get the word out. And we said "Are you sure? Because, we know a lot of people." And they were sure, so we sent the email out to everyone we could. And the soft opening party was well attended by friends of the owners, PPNA members, Friends of the Park, and any lucky Joe that got a hold of the invite. It was all free food, and if you wanted a sweet, you just had to point. They basically came around with samples of their food. There were plenty of empanadas and salsa's and Sangria all around. It does not have a liquor license, but the free opening party had sangria. It was pleasantly crowded when I went. It was standing room only, as all the chairs were taken by lucky patrons. I stayed for an hour and talked to Tara for some of it, but things were hopping. Food was coming out and everyone was having a loud, good time. I want all my parties to have tons of free food and drinks, but that's me.

Craves Café opened in the shuttered Papa Nicholas space. We were saddened by the loss of the coffee place that did not survive the streetscape project. It was disappointing for the entire neighborhood, because a coffee house with sandwiches was sorely needed in our community. And we really liked the place and the owners. Flash forward to 2010. Tara and her mother in law, decided that we needed a sandwich shop/coffee house, and they took it upon themselves to go for it. They live here in the area, and wanted to go to a place like this. So, they went forward with their vision. It's been a lot of work to make this happen, and a lot of sweat equity, and a learning process. First, let me tell you about the menu.

The menu is quite extensive. They open early. 7:00 am on the weekdays and Saturday. And they are open until 9:00 pm. At the moment, they are closed on Sundays. They serve freshly brewed coffee that you can customize with a shot of flavor. They have espresso drinks, frozen coffee drinks, fruit smoothies, hot tea and a cold blend ice tea of the day and hot chocolate. And you can buy a ton of different pastries and desserts to go with your coffee or tea. Or, if you are hungrier, opt for breakfast. We were there for an early breakfast at 9:00 Sunday morning a few weeks ago. We ordered the chorizo scramble empanada's that came with Crave's salsa roja. We ordered two each, and then we ordered another two each. I'm very fond of chorizo, and I frequently state that I have to go through a 12 step program because of the addiction. I usually say it to be funny, but in actuality, I'm totally an addict. And there is a fresh fruit yogurt made with added blueberries and strawberry with a little cup of granola to add. These beautiful little parfaits are to die for. And you can just grab one to go, or buy some for your favorite friends as a treat. I'm telling you, these yogurts will have you fantasizing about getting another one. They are that good.

One of the things that was missing when this place opened was an outdoor patio. Papa Nicholas had one, and I love sitting outside if the weather is nice. Well, it took a little while to get the permit, but the outdoor patio is open on the wide sidewalk next to the restaurant. It's complete with many comfortable chairs and tables, and flower boxes and a metal entrance and fence. It's a beauty. And the best part? There is a parking lot. Midway down the block, south of the restaurant is a parking a lot for a generous amount of cars. There was an open field after a fire leveled a building. Hhhhhmmmm. A parking lot instead of a field. That's a huge improvement. And there is street parking on Agatite. At the moment, there is street parking on Milwaukee in front of Crave's. The street scape project opened the street up to three lanes in this area-so there is a parking lane. This will be good for business.

Now, for the rest of the food. There are salads and soups. I love tortilla soup, and I haven't had this version yet, but it's on my radar. The Crave's homemade salad is also on my list of things that look great to try. It has a mix of romaine lettuce and baby spinach with tomatoes, cucumbers, chick peas, green olives, finely sliced red onions, chopped egg and feta cheese topped with a homemade vinaigrette for \$5.29. Something good that I feel good about eating? A real rarity. I did try a lot of different things at the party. They brought around steak tacos, chicken tacos, quesadillas, Crave's signature Lavosh and guacamole and all different salsas. They have sandwiches and Panini's, I have the classic cubano on my list. There are empanada's, quesadillas, burritos and taco's. There are many taco sides. I particularly like the confetti rice, a rice dish made with black beans and corn mild chili and feta cheese, but the Spanish rice has appeal as well. There are Crave's combos for the people who want to try two different things at once. Last Saturday, after a manicure and pedicure with my favorite nail technician-Kasia at XOX salon, I went over to Crave's for lunch and sat in the newly opened patio area. I ordered 4 yogurt parfaits and took two home and stopped in at XOX to give my girls a treat. I ordered steak taco plate, and was rewarded with three double corn tortilla tacos with spanish rice and refried beans. This was only \$7.95. It came with a small fountain drink. I loved the steak tacos and sides and sat there all by myself feeling smug and happy. Now, I want to mention that everything is cooked to order. It's not like McDonald's where everything is ready and they pride themselves on getting you in and out quickly. There is a lot of care in the preparation of your food, so don't be surprised if it takes a little longer than typical fast food. There is nothing typical about Crave's Café. And now, you can get an unsweetened iced tea of the day-which I see in my future since I brainstormed the idea with Tara. They are open to suggestions and opinions, if you have any positive or negative experiences, they want to know, so they can fix any issues rapidly. So, don't be shy. Crave's is hiring and training staff and cooks. They are doing trial by fire. But, they love their eatery and they believe in it. I love their spirit. So, go there and try it yourself. The staff is friendly and the menu extensive. The staff may misstep occasionally, and the cook may misstep as well, but these issues will work out as they learn and grow confident. So, cut them some slack while they get their sea legs, and know that eventually, when they click on all cylinders, that you were there in their infancy. And I think it's going to grow into a very successful restaurant. I'm heading there today to get another yogurt

and some iced tea of the day. Maybe a pastry. Yum.

Crave's Café is at 4431 N. Milwaukee, at the corner of Milwaukee and Agatite, a block north of Milwaukee and Montrose. The inside is beautifully done and WiFi accessible. Their hours are 7am to 9pm weekdays and 7 to 9 on Saturdays. Their number is 773-481-2337. And, they offer Portage Park Neighborhood Association 10% off with membership card everyday. It's a gem.

We invite members of the PPNA to join us as well as continuing to ask for suggestions naming your favorite restaurant in the area. In 2010 we hope you will continue to suggest

restaurants and join us when we meet. If you would like to join us, our only requirement is that you do not notify the restaurant. We all pay for our own portion of the check, share

the dishes and offer opinions for the review. An article about the restaurant will appear in the following PPNA newsletter. Send your emails to membership@portagepark.org.

or
communications@portagepark.org.