

Elevating American fare with understated ease

Winberie's

2 Kent Place Blvd., Summit, (908) 277-4224. Hours: lunch, 11:30 a.m.-4 p.m. Monday through Saturday; dinner, 4 p.m.-10 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 4 p.m.-11 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 4 p.m.-9 p.m. Sunday; brunch 10:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Sunday. selectrestaurants.com

★★ 1/2

BY TERESA POLITANO
FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Forget coffeehouses. Most American debates occur over a bowl of artichoke dip: Is it chic for the bridesmaids to wear black or somehow just wrong? Which Manning brother is the better player? Is Green Day today better than Green Day before? Is it really possible to get Michelle Obama's arms?

If we were honest, we'd admit that we excuse our love of artichoke dip primarily because it has a vegetable in its name; despite the liberal amounts of cream in the dip and the equally liberal amounts of melted cheese on its accompaniments, it's still, well, you know, healthy. So we kick back, share a bowl with a friend and happily

debate the light stuff.

The artichoke dip (\$7.95) at Winberie's in Summit comes with fried pita chips, which are liberally covered in melted cheese. The dip itself is mild and extraordinarily creamy, and the whole affair is addictively satisfying in the same way that beach fries are addictively satisfying — it's youthful and indulgent, a carefree food associated with good friends and good times.

Winberie's seems to be devoted entirely to good times, a restaurant that seems to understand exactly what Americans want after a hard day at the office or a weekend dealing with the errands or the in-laws. It has the feel of an American chain restaurant, and that's because it is — although it's a small chain, with restaurants in Summit, Princeton and Ridgewood, plus a few in Pennsylvania and Illinois. It's relaxed here, a casual, family-style restaurant with familiar American favorites.

Of course, "chain restaurant," "casual, family-style" and "familiar American favorites" are not the kind of words that elicit thrills in the souls of foodies. We can be quite smug about places

such as this, seeking as we do something new and adventurous, something free-range or grass-fed, something fusion or interpretive.

eating out

And so we were pleasantly surprised with our dinners here. This is casual American, yes — Cajun mac and cheese, burgers, wraps and French onion soup — but done with care, clarity and focus.

First, the décor: It's crisp yet welcoming in an old Manhattan pub sort of way, with a warm wood bar and black-and-white-tiled floors. The staff is cheery and optimistic. You already feel better. Second, the menu: Somehow there's something for everyone, and yet it's very streamlined. A carefully edited menu usually indicates a clear focus in the kitchen, and when fewer items are offered, it often means they are more likely to be done well. Plus, we noted some attention to detail on the menu, mentioning the cheeses used, for example (Gruyère and Emmental), and some

slightly outside-the-box innovations (cilantro-lime shrimp).

And so we were feeling more optimistic.

Indeed, the greens were crisp in the Caesar salad (\$3.95) and the New York strip (\$23.95) was a lovely and savory piece of meat. This came thankfully not with fries but with a loving side order of scalloped potatoes, their edges crisp and nicely browned just like Grandma used to make.

The Niçoise salad with seared rare tuna (\$14.50) was a delightfully delicate salad, arriving with bright

greens sufficiently covered, but not overwhelmingly so, in a flirty little dressing, plus wonderfully simple red bliss potatoes and perfectly done green beans. This is a salad clearly elevated from standard tavern fare. (And a thorough antidote to the artichoke dip.)

Desserts were a surprise as well. We were expecting some sort of oversized Oreo-cheesecake-caramel offering that for some reason so many Americans seem to fancy, but the desserts here are simple and good. Plus the restaurant offers mini-versions of its

sweets — a little something — for \$3.95. We found that size to be perfect, and thoroughly enjoyed the perfectly caramelized crème brûlée and the more indulgent (but still not overly so) banana cream pie.

And so we left Winberie's with a mental note to return, because it's a fun and lively place and because it cares about the quality of the food on the plate and has elevated American favorites to a higher level. It's not hamburger with foie gras, just a better burger. And for that, it deserves a salute.

