

Biscuits and gravy seal the deal: Front Room's tops

[GO Entertainment Weekly 2/8/06]

If you haven't heard about The Front Room yet, you must be living in a cave somewhere.

This neighborhood place on Portland's Munjoy Hill opened Dec. 7 and has taken off like a shot, probably because it fills a much-needed niche in the city for a moderately-priced place to get a decent meal that's not a specialty place or a chain restaurant. Its fare is advertised as "new American comfort food."

The waits to be seated for dinner can be long if you don't want to eat early or late. So if you want to check this place out, try the daily brunch, when tables turn over more quickly.

I met a friend at The Front Room on a Saturday at 11:30 a.m., which should be a heavy-traffic time. But there were several tables for two available, and we were allowed to pick where we wanted to sit.

The restaurant is located in a spot that's been used as storage for the past two decades or so. Before that, it was Sam's Superette, a well-known neighborhood market run for 30 years by Sam Segal, a Polish immigrant who died in 1995. Renovations on the space began last winter, and it is now a cozy place with lots of windows and warm woodwork. The table tops and bar are all mahogany.

"The building was basically falling apart when we got to it," said chef/owner Harding Lee Smith. "Through a lot of painstaking work, we've managed to restore it quite nicely."

The restaurant seats a little more than 50, including the 10 seats at the bar. There is an open kitchen in the back where diners can watch the staff in action.

The brunch menu features breakfast plates, soups, sides, salads and sandwiches. My friend decided to try the french toast breakfast plate (\$4.50) and ordered some bacon and a couple of eggs over medium on the side. I ordered an omelet with spinach, onions and mushrooms, and added home fries and toast (\$5, plus \$1 for the extra filling in the omelet).

I'd heard the biscuits and gravy are excellent here, and so we asked to split a side order for \$2.75. The waitress brought us the biscuits and gravy as a whole order, with my friend's side of two eggs on the plate, a minor mistake that we didn't care about because the food was so good.

The omelet was nicely done, though not the best I've had, and the home fries were cooked perfectly. I chose French bread for toast, but you can also have focaccia, an English muffin, or other options.

The real star was the biscuits and gravy. We scarfed down most of that plate before we had even made a dent in our own orders, sopping up the egg yolks with each forkful of biscuit. Often when you order biscuits and gravy you get doughy biscuits and white gravy that is gluey and tasteless.

In this case, the biscuits were crispy outside and had a light, cakey texture inside. The gravy was full of flavor and had bits of sausage floating in it.

Smith said he uses soft butter as opposed to cold, which makes the biscuits more shortcake-like. The secret to the gravy, he said, is the restaurant's homemade sausage seasoned with fennel and coriander and other things.

"As we cook the sausage for the breakfast orders, some of the fat will come out of that and that's what we start our roux with for the gravy," Smith said. "And then you just add milk into that and crumble the sausage, and that's one of the keys to it. The other thing is we make the biscuits pretty much every half an hour. We're putting in a batch so they're always fresh."

The bacon that came with my friend's French toast was so thick that, at first, I thought they had made a mistake and brought her a slice of country ham. Smith said he buys all his pork products and eggs from Sunset Acres Farm.

"One of the things I like about (the bacon) is it's not overly smoky," he said. "Some of the more boutique-y bacons at the same kind of price level as (Sunset Acres) are good, but they're very smoky and sweet."

Other breakfast plates on the menu include two eggs baked with cream and parmesan with a green salad (\$4.50) and silver-dollar pancakes with whipped butter and maple syrup (\$4). There are lots of sides available, including house-made corned beef hash (\$6) and organic yogurt (\$2), and bread and sweets such as apple coffee cake (\$1.75) and sticky buns (\$1.75).

If you're more in the mood for the "unch" part of brunch, The Front Room serves fish chowder and French onion soup, both for \$5. There's a half-dozen salads to choose from, and sandwiches that range from burgers on focaccia (\$7) to a BLT made with that good bacon (\$6).

A lot of people are asking about the name of the restaurant and what it means. Smith said it's a traditional English phrase that fits the place well because the restaurant is basically one big room in the front of the building. But there's more. When he lived in San Francisco, Smith frequented a pizza place around the corner called The Front Room.

"It stuck in my brain, apparently, and that's one of the reasons it came to me so quickly," he said. "It really suits it. It seems like it fits the place very, very well."

The Features staff of the Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram anonymously samples meals for about \$6.