

## Dining review: The Saloon in Estero rustles up great food, service



The new wood-fired grill and bar opened Dec. 15 in the Estero mall. Wochit

Western-themed restaurants often conjure up images of waitstaff wearing cowboy boots and hats, of wagon wheels on the walls.

[The Saloon Wood Fired Grill](#) does not fall into that kitschy category. True, paintings of cowboys and American Indians fill the walls, and country music plays in the background (not loud, and one dining companion said she didn't even notice until I mentioned it).

Yet the latest fine-dining spot lives up to expectations as a creation of Culinary Concepts, the same food group that gave us Chops City Grill, Yabba Island Grill and Pazzo! Cucina Italiana in Collier and Lee counties.

We arrived just before 4:30 p.m. Sunday, when the restaurant said it opened on its website, and it already was open with customers sitting down and eating. Luckily it wasn't crowded, so we sat at a table beneath paintings of Indian warriors on the plains in the 19th century.

Our friendly waitress arrived in no time to take our drink order. We also ordered appetizers from the "Saloon Starters" list: Smoke and Fire (\$9.90), which was eight hickory-smoked wings served with Saloon BBQ sauce that had a little bite.

We also opted for three deviled eggs with pecan bacon (\$4.50). The wings were sweet and tangy, and the eggs included a mild, creamy middle that matched perfectly with the sweet bacon.

The main course meals did not disappoint either. This is a steak place, so that's what I ordered; I went for the Lonesome Cowboy (\$32.40), with a 6-ounce filet instead of sirloin. It's topped with Sweet Willie BBQ brisket and pulled pork served with butter-topped mashed potatoes that were delicious as well.

The meat almost did not require a knife, as the medium-rare piece was more tender than a 1970s country song.

One dining companion opted for the BBQ Alfredo (\$16.90), a half-pound of imported fettucine tossed in a "goldilocks" fresh cream sauce, meaning it wasn't too thick or watery but just right. The pasta was topped with cracked black pepper and Parmesan cheese and 4 ounces of barbecue pork.

The third companion had "buyer's remorse" after his order, The Combo (\$24.50). That was beef brisket, pulled pork, one smoked chicken leg and thigh, and one-quarter rack of St. Louis style ribs that were dry and tasteless.

His entire order, in fact, was ordinary although the chicken leg had a hint of smoky flavor, while the beef brisket was tender and tasty.

The dessert menu was "we'll have one of each," although we came close. Disappointed with the meat combo, my friend chose wisely with the Mississippi Mud (\$6.50) — layers of chocolate mousse, whipped cream and caramel with Oreo cookie crumbs, all served in a jar.

While his dessert was tough to beat, my banana rum cobbler (\$6.50) was up to the task. I've always enjoyed cobblers, the hot vs. cold taste, and this was hard to pass up with bananas with brown sugar and rum baked in a skillet with vanilla wafers and a streusel topping served with a scoop of vanilla ice cream.

Another fellow diner went for the three-scoop gelato (\$6.50) and chose spumoni, strawberry cheesecake and Almond joy.

The overall dining experience was a good one. The Saloon, with its brown tones throughout and chandeliers, looks nothing like the bar it replaced, the pastel-heavy Blue Water Bistro.

Maybe not quite a walk into the late 1800s, but The Saloon creates some old-time magic with food that even cowboys would write home about.

### **The Saloon Wood Fired Grill**

**Where:** 23151 Village Shops Way, Suite 103, Coconut Point mall, Estero

**Hours:** 4:30-9 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays; 4:30-8 p.m. Sundays

**What:** Appetizers, \$4.50-\$14.50; soups, \$4.50 for chili, clam chowder or soup of the day; salads and sandwiches, \$10.50-\$18.90; entrees, \$16.90-\$43.50; desserts, all \$6.50

**Information:** 239-949-2583 or go to [thesaloon.net](http://thesaloon.net)

**Forks:** 4 out of 5