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Kilkenny House: A modern twist on a '70s favorite

by Teresa Politano/For The Star-Ledger
Thursday December 04, 2008, 2:19 PM

Kilkenny House Restaurant and Pub, 112 South Ave. Cranford. (908) 276-3414. 11:30 a.m.-2 a.m. daily. thekilkennyhouse.com. Area: Union County. **TWO AND A HALF STARS**



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When did you last have a baked artichoke and brie dip? Hot dips were tres chic as an hors d'oeuvre in the '70s, and ubiquitously appeared on restaurant menus for many, many years. You don't often discover them on today's menus, but, if you do, and if they're done right, you'll remember why America fell in love with them in the first place. Oh sure, their occasional reappearance doesn't quite reach the level of sophistication of, say, the comeback of the '70s Diane von Furstenberg wrap dress, but still.

At Kilkenny House in Cranford, the hot artichoke and brie dip (\$9) is grown-up comfort food, and you'll be glad you ordered it. This is one of the most popular appetizers on the menu, and it's not served in a hollowed out loaf of bread (thank goodness). Here it comes with warm and perfectly toasted kitchen-made bread. This dip is comforting, salty and addictive. It's something Rhoda would have whipped up for a Mary Tyler Moore dinner party.

Kilkenny is a new restaurant in town -- it opened in September -- but is the kind of place that marks a return to an earlier philosophy of restaurant sophistication. Here the food is reliable but not fancy, the decorations are eclectic conversation pieces seemingly culled from grandmother's attic (violins, knickknacks, paintings of the Irish countryside), but, most important, the prime objective is to be a friendly and welcoming place to have dinner and/or drinks. There's a reason Irish pubs were popular in New York and Boston in the '70s and '80s, and there's a reason many of today's chain restaurants have aspired to copy them.

But intimate and friendly is tough to copy when you're a large chain. Kilkenny House, on the other hand, seems sure to quickly become one of those places where you'll be recognized and greeted with open arms, perhaps as soon as your second visit. Indeed, the owner, Barry O'Donovan, stopped by to chat with guests several times during the course of the evening.

Another appetizer, garlic shrimp with tequila (\$11), a special, was not as inviting as the brie dip. The tequila taste was overwhelming and just didn't work for me.

But the dinners were charmers. Shepherd's pie (\$15), like meat loaf, is a dish that can quickly cross the line into that taste realm of tired leftovers; here it was fresh and appealing. Grilled salmon (\$18) with ginger sauce was good without being fancy.

Writer Eric Asimov once described Junior's cheesecake as a dessert that could make grown men swoon. The famous New York cheesecake (\$7) is available at Kilkenny's -- order it and you'll remember, too, why we all fell in love the first time around. (And you'll wonder why more restaurants don't offer this classic.) Apple tart (\$8) is made in house to winning results.

It's not the best time in the world to open a restaurant, but Kilkenny's does seem a perfect fit to these uncertain times, a place where the food is simple and good, but where friendliness and comfort and a collegial atmosphere are paramount.

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