



Melting Pot Fondue Restaurant offers diners a truly unique, fun, tasty and interactive dining experience

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MOBILE, Alabama -- Restaurants at every level, from fine-dining and fast-casual to self-service and drive-thru, are fond these days of ballyhooing at their own unique "restaurant experience" that makes them stand out from the rest.

But there is a new fine-dining destination in Mobile, one that truly sets a new standard for eating out. One that can truly boast of having a unique, one-of-a-kind experience.

The Melting Pot, located at 840 Montlimar Drive off of Airport Boulevard, is a restaurant unlike just about anything else you will encounter. In this very plush, very chic eatery you will find that the dining "experience" can take upwards of two hours and you and your guests will have cooked your own meal.

The Melting Pot fondue restaurant is a very successful chain of fondue restaurants that started in Florida and now extends across the country. There are 132 franchises nationwide and the trend clearly is for more. There are three in Alabama - Birmingham, Huntsville and the newest location in Mobile.

The concept is simple: Guests can tailor their meal to fit their mood, everything from a luxurious four-course dining experience that includes appetizer, salad, entrée and dessert. Or you can simply order one of their savory cheese appetizers or go straight to one of their indulgent chocolately desserts.

"People here have been very welcoming and very receptive to the concept," said Russell Perkins, the managing partner and general manager. "It is a unique dining experience and we have had lots of guests who are curious about it, but once they get here and learn about it they are blown away," he said.

The décor of this ultra-hip restaurant is just that, very warm and inviting with lots of warm hues and subdued lighting. The seating capacity is a deceptive 171. I say deceptive because it is a very intimate dining experience in a large setting; no matter where you are you feel like you are in a small setting.

For even more privacy, they have what they call the "Lover's Lane," a strip of small, individual booths that run down one wall and offer a totally private dining experience.

But what separates The Melting Pot from the rest of the dining realm is the notion of cooking your own food on a fondue pot on your table. That's right, you cook it yourself at the table; you are the only one to touch the finished product before it hits your plate.

The first thing that happens after you arrive and decide on what you want to order is the cheese course. When I think of fondue I naturally think of cheese, which is only natural.

You can choose from four different cheeses and my wife and I opted for the cheddar - a blend of aged, medium-sharp cheddar and Emmenthaler Swiss cheeses, lager beer, garlic and seasonings. The waitress carefully blended the cheeses, beer and seasonings in a fondue pot that was the centerpiece of every table.

But the centerpiece, the most important part of the whole set up, is the special induction heating element that sits on each of the tables. It heats up water that heats up the pot that heats up the broth or chocolate or cheese and in which you dip the bits of bread, vegetables, seafood and meat. It is cool to the touch but it heats up quickly and efficiently.

The pots, I found out later, are specially made for The Melting Pot. They are actually double boilers with the broth pot resting in a pot of boiling water and safety is always stressed.

The wait staff must be specially trained for such duty and go through a rigorous training process that can take upward of two weeks. They are the front line in ensuring that your meal at the Melting Pot is ideal; they are there to make suggestions and generally assist you on this new kind of dining experience.

"We have phenomenal staff. I can't say enough about them," he said.

The waitress carefully heated up the ingredients for the first course and when it was finished she deposited a few bowls of crusty bread and some assorted vegetables. After a quick course in fondue etiquette (no double-dipping and don't eat directly off your fondue fork) we were off to the races.

It was mighty tasty and frankly a lot of fun. We ate at our leisure and the cheesy fondue was fantastic. I think my favorite dipper was the bits of crusty bread that provided a perfect palate for the gooey cheese.

Pretty soon the salad arrived and it was the one part of the meal that isn't dipped into the hot liquid and eaten.

"Nothing is cooked in the kitchen," said Perkins. They do all the prep work, chopping and dicing the vegetables and such, but most of the work is done tableside. In fact, the only oven in the kitchen is a tiny convection device.

The entrees arrived with some small fanfare when another trusty aid fetched out a cauldron of piping hot broth. It arrived in sealed metal container and was piping hot when it arrived. We then set out to skewer and cook our food.

I ordered The Classic, which is one of the more popular selections from their menu. It consists of pieces of Angus beef sirloin, Memphis-style BBQ pork medallions, Pacific white shrimp, herb-cruste d all-natural breast of chicken and teriyaki-marinated sirloin.

My bride opted for the French Quarter, which includes filet mignon, all-natural breast of chicken, Pacific white shrimp seasoned with Cajun spices and Andouille sausage.

I didn't take long for the talented waitress to demonstrate to a ham-handed food writer the vagaries of the fondue pot. Skewer the meat, bread, vegetable or whatever it is you are cooking and place it into the pot of boiling broth. When it is cooked to your liking you remove it to your place and adorn with one of several savory dipping sauces.

It's actually quite simple and a lot of fun.

We skipped dessert, but did get it to go. I confess that it didn't look like a lot of food, but by the time we were finished with the meal I was totally satisfied.

The melting pot has been open for a couple of months and is in full stride now. Perkins said they are busy booking Christmas parties and their special private dining room is perfect for such gatherings. They also just started an official happy hour that runs from 5-8 p.m. Monday-Thursday.

"We have \$5 cocktails, \$4 wines and \$3 beers for happy hour," he said.

Another new feature that I predict will be popular is Ladies Night every Wednesday where you can enjoy \$5 cheddar cheese fondue and select from a group of wines priced at \$10 a bottle.

Speaking of wine, something I like to do a lot, the first thing you notice when you walk in the front door is an imposing wall of wine that is very impressive. "We have an extensive wine cellar with 50 wines under \$50," Perkins said. In fact, he said, none of their wines are more expensive than that.

All-in-all, The Melting Pot Fondue Restaurant is a truly unique dining experience. It is not the place to go when you are in hurry or wanting to grab something for the road. It is a dining destination where I encourage you to go and immerse yourself in the menu and the experience.

Other restaurants boast of their unique dining experience; The Melting Pot truly is unique.

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