

FRIDAY NIGHT FISH FRY



Now that I've sampled a few Upstate New York Friday Night Fish Fries, one thing that especially strikes me about them is the venues. Quite often they are held in places that are not normally restaurants, such as private clubs or rooms converted to that purpose for one evening.

I can't speak for the cooks since they are really good at what they do, but the waitresses are generally inexperienced. Not that this is a bad thing! Your order is taken attentively, while a helper drops

by to bring carefully napkin-wrapped cutlery, and someone else gingerly delivers your drinks.

The only other place I've seen this earnest division of labor is at sponsored picnics, where friends and neighbors pitch in. And so it is that this meal is a far cry from a restaurant outing—it is local people serving local people, which is part of its unique charm.

However, moving here from coastal Massachusetts, I was dubious about the prospects of getting a good seafood meal around here on Friday or any other night for that matter. Well, it turns out I was being rather literal-minded. A "Friday Night Fish Fry" menu might offer a decent fish-and-chips, or even "broiled haddock" (a defrosted filet swimming in melted butter with a dusting of dry parsley flakes), but there are plenty of other solid, familiar choices such as spaghetti and eggplant parm.

No, the object seems to be just to go out to dinner on Friday and enjoy a simple, affordable meal, fish or otherwise, in the company of neighbors. You sit on folding chairs arrayed around plain tables, choose your entree, choose baked-mashed-or-fried, and then decide between creamy-Italian or blue-cheese dressing for your salad.

After some desultory chatting about the weather with your companions, it's time to eavesdrop on the other tables. Did the head of the DPW really give the supervisor job to his brother-in-law? Is it true the mayor's first cousin is the head of the local Urban Renewal office and if so, what does this mean for the city? Have Don and George changed real-estate agents again in their ongoing bid to sell that house? Did you hear about the new gift shop opening up on Main Street next month? In short, there are bigger fish to fry on Friday nights around here.

As for the places that host this weekly ritual, mostly civic organizations you'll note, I've concluded that they are simply doing their civic duty—they are nourishing their community.