

dining HOPE S. PHILBRICK

Touch and go

Consistency isn't a given when you plan a casual meal at The Grove

FRIES CAN BE VERY REVEALING.

Visiting The Grove Restaurant & Tavern for the first time, the sweet potato fries blow me away. They're served with a raspberry chipotle dipping sauce that is tangy and spicy, but the fries are so delicious on their own that there's no need for it.

The fries are dark with a micro-thin tender-crisp exterior and fluffy-silken

interior. They're addictive: I was invited to sample one, but manage to devour half the pile before my hand is slapped away. I regret that I don't have my own.

My buffalo chicken salad (\$7.49) features scant servings of grilled chicken breast and diced tomatoes atop generous helpings of iceberg and Romaine lettuce and shredded cheddar-jack cheese. The balance is off, and the ensemble appears to be quickly assembled using items readily found bagged at local grocery stores.

The chicken cheese steak sandwich (\$6.99, including fries) blends chopped chicken, onions, bell peppers and melted cheese in a soft hoagie roll. The flavor is satisfying, but the bread-to-filling ratio leaves too little chicken in the mix. The sandwich is served wrapped in silver paper; its temperature and the bread's texture suggests that it was recently pulled from a microwave.

But another stealthy acquisition of a sweet potato fry tempers disappointment.



Dine inside or out, but watch for spotty execution from any table at The Grove.

"These right here are worth the price of admission," I say shoving the thing into my mouth before it can be stolen back.

The fries are an interesting shape — perfect rectangles and wider than a julienne cut. "What is the name of this cut?" I ask a server refilling our water glasses. She agrees to ask the chef, but never returns.

So I ask again when she brings the check. After several minutes she returns with the official answer: "He doesn't know because they arrive already cut." Ah, so these frozen babies are merely cooked in back. That's okay, right? Not every restaurant is meant for foodies. Besides, whoever is manning the fry cooker appears to be an expert to the task.

TWO WEEKS LATER, I RETURN anticipating my own side order of sweet

potato fries. They are nothing like the previous batch. They're brown and taste like it's way past time to change the oil. The thick, crunchy exterior overpowers what remains of the interior. I want to cry. I can't bear to eat them.

The classic burger (\$6.99, including fries) is a half-pound of ground beef served with lettuce, tomato, onion and a choice of cheese. It's average and edible, but lacks a noteworthy quality.

The portabella sandwich (\$6.79 plus side) pairs the grilled mushroom with roasted red pepper, lettuce, tomato and pepper-jack cheese. The flavors work together, but the slimy texture is disconcerting. The sandwich is served with raspberry vinaigrette, a pleasant condiment on its own, but here it adds a taste that seems totally out of place. Ketchup is better.

The potato salad side has an unexpected crunch; some of the pieces slathered in the mustard-based sauce are underdone.

ENDING ON A GOOD NOTE, THE KEY lime pie (\$4.59) is delicious. Its smooth, tangy, sweet filling is a welcome contrast to the crunchy graham cracker crust. "This is tasty," I inform the server.

"It's brought in," she says, confirming what the French fries already revealed: The preparations, like the quality of the offerings on any given day, are touch and go.

Choose the right item on the right day at The Grove, and the results are perfectly satisfying. But there are no guarantees of consistency.

i FOOD FILE

The GROVE

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Food: ★★☆☆☆

Service: ★★☆☆☆

Comfort and Aesthetics: ★★☆☆☆

Value: ★★☆☆☆

Scene: ★★☆☆☆