

The Rainforest Cafe at the Downtown Disney District: A Disneyland Dining Review

by Dorothy Compton, PassPorter Guest Contributor

A trade show brought me to Southern California and even though I didn't go into the parks, a visit to Downtown Disney was a must.

My daughter and I parked at the Downtown Disney parking area, where the first three hours are free and if you have your ticket stamped at one of the table service restaurants or the movie theater, you get an additional two hours. To discourage theme park visitors from parking in this lot, the hourly rate is \$6 per hour after the free hours. This parking is close to the west end of Downtown Disney near the Disneyland Hotel and most parking places are just a short walk from the action.

As you enter the Downtown Disney district from the parking lot, the Rainforest Cafe is on your left just before the Monorail entrance. The structure is reminiscent of a large temple in the rainforests of South America, with the sounds of wild birds and animals emanating from the building. At the entrance to the restaurant is a large elephant where you check for availability or make a reservation for later. Even though we arrived around 3:00 in the afternoon, as it was Star Wars race weekend I wasn't sure if there would be any availability, but I had my Rainforest Cafe membership card which provides priority seating (a real value if you haven't made a reservation and there are many people waiting), so we decided to give it a try. Fortunately there was no waiting and we were seated immediately.

Upon entering the restaurant, you pass next to the retail area, with many unique items. It is very enticing but we were really hungry and so kept walking, thinking about visiting the store after our tummies quit crying for food. The main check-in area is at a large aquarium made of two hollow plexiglass columns joined by an overhead section, so that you walk under the fish on your way into the dining room. There are a few seats in the waiting area, but not many. This day, we were directed to go up stairs to a second check-in desk. The stairs reminded me of the Tarzan's Treehouse attraction in Disneyland, including a rope sidewall. As you go up, you pass next to a lighted globe above a roaring waterfall, with a rainbow highlighted on the wall.

The theming is incredible. The walls are covered with foliage, birds, and animals. There are several waterfalls and aquariums. There is seating on the ground floor, second floor, and second floor balcony. Our seats

were on the second floor right in front of a gorilla. Periodically some animals go in to motion thanks to crude animatronics, accompanied by thunder, lightning, and the sounds of rain and animals. It can be rather loud with lots of sensory stimuli, so keep that in mind if you plan on dining there.

Our server came quickly and handed us menus, while telling us about two specials not on the menu. We ordered our drinks and away she went to get those while we studied the menu. My daughter decided on the Caribbean coconut shrimp with french fries ("Tender shrimp rolled in fresh coconut, fried golden brown and served with coleslaw, mango sauce and your choice of a side -- Seasonal Vegetables, Caribbean Rice, Safari Fries, Coleslaw, Red Skinned Mashed Potatoes or Tri-Color Tortilla Chips"). I selected one of the specials, "Moqueca tilapia and shrimp over sticky rice with roasted red onions, red and green peppers smothered in a tomato/coconut-based sauce." Since we were so hungry we also ordered a side of onions rings as an appetizer. The onion rings came quickly and we devoured them. They were crispy and served with a tangy tomato sauce.

□ Our server came back and introduced her replacement while she went on a break. While we waited for our entrees to arrive, I took a few pictures of the place. When I got back our meal was served but mine was the wrong special! I immediately let the first server that walked past know about the mistake. He took the plate away and went to investigate. Soon a manager came by and verified my order and offered to bring some fries as I waited for the correct entree to be prepared. I asked if I could have the seasonal vegetables instead of fries, and off she went. Soon another manager came by and brought the original, incorrect dish and offered to let me try it as I was waiting. That sounded like a good idea so I said OK and that they might want to cancel the vegetables. So, I tried one bite of the Fejoada (a beef based dish that came with sticky rice). Oh my, it was too spicy for me, so the one bite was the only one I had. The manager came by again and I let her know the Fejoada was too spicy for my taste so off it went for a second time. Fortunately soon after, a server arrived with the vegetables; seasoned and sauteed squash. They were delicious.

□ My daughter was finishing her meal as my correct order arrived. The manager offered to bring some ice cream to her while she waited for me to finish my meal. We declined, as our plan was to walk the Downtown Disney district and then return later for dessert (a volcano). My daughter's meal was good. The coconut shrimp was butterflied before battering and frying leaving the shrimp sweet, crisp and very tasty. The coleslaw and french fries were unremarkable but good as well.

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□My entree was wonderful; the plating beautiful. Centered in a shallow bowl was a mound of sticky rice holding up two large pieces of very lightly breaded and grilled tilapia. On top of the mound was a ring of roasted red onions holding three grilled shrimp topped with a plantain chip. Surrounding the rice were more roasted red onions, red and green bell peppers in a tomato/coconut-based sauce similar to cream of tomato soup but with just a hint of heat. I would definitely order this again.

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□Throughout our meal we had even more server and manager interaction, with everyone checking on the progress of the error and correction. The original server came back from her break and apologized for the mistake. The manager came back and comped my meal. It was nice that they owned the error and really worked hard to make things right.

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□We did go back after our walk and sat in the bar section to have our Volcano ("Sparkling Volcano - Enough for 2 or more people! A giant rich chocolate brownie cake stacked up high, served warm with vanilla ice cream, fresh whipped cream, and topped with caramel and chocolate sauces"). What is nice about sitting in the bar are is that if there's space available you can just go sit. There are a few tables but the bar stools are fun. Each bar stool is decorated to be the back end of an animal, including the tail! For our dessert, I sat on a giraffe and my daughter sat on a zebra. The volcano is huge and could easily be shared by three or four people. As there were only two of us, we saved much of the brownie for our drive home the next day.

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□So if you need a touch of Disney but don't have the time or money to visit the parks, check out the Downtown Disney area and have an immersive experience in the Rainforest Cafe. It's definitely good eats.

About The Author: Dorothy enjoys planning Disney vacations and is looking forward to a cruise later this year with just her husband as they celebrate their 25th wedding anniversary.

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