

DINING

For more than a century, this restaurant has put the 'Kentucky' in Northern Kentucky



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About a month ago, my wife, Amy, and I took our 6-year-old daughter, Sylvia, to Greyhound Tavern for her first-ever all-you-can-eat, buffet-style Sunday brunch. While Sylvia's behavior can be hit or miss at restaurants, she was humbled into an almost Emily Post-like state of mind when she stepped inside the restaurant's Hunt Room and saw the bounty spread before her.

Like witnessing a child's first steps or her first time riding a bike, there was something magical about watching Sylvia's first go-around at an all-you-can-eat buffet. "Really?" she asked. "I can have *anything* I want here?"

Yes, my child, I answered. Anything at all. The world is yours. My work here is done.

Sylvia took full advantage, going back multiple times to stock up on French toast and biscuits, cantaloupe and strawberries and cookies and pastries. We even let her navigate the crowded restaurant by herself for seconds (and thirds, and fourths) and laughed when we saw the look of determination on her darling little face as she held on to her overloaded plate for dear life while dodging diners and harried servers.

You know those moments when your kid acts so cute that it breaks your heart that they'll one day grow up? This was one of those moments.

An old Kentucky home

If you've never been to the Greyhound, the best way to describe it is something akin to a Southern-style country club restaurant, albeit one that allows access without an annual

membership fee. It's also the kind of place that calls to mind all those long-gone neighborhood restaurants of Greater Cincinnati, the ones where we used to meet up with family or friends before the big chains with jingles like "Eatin' good in the neighborhood" took over.

You know what I really like about the Greyhound, though? It's that it puts the "Kentucky" in Northern Kentucky with its excellent versions of Southern classics such as fried green tomatoes, country ham and the classic hot brown. We here in Cincinnati tend to overlook all the culinary contributions the Bluegrass State has made to the world, but the Greyhound honors them and gives them a big warm hug.

The fried chicken is a must. I tried it during Sunday brunch armed with the knowledge that two of my favorite Southern food writers (and brothers), Matt and Ted Lee, once called it some of the finest they've ever tasted. Now that I've tried it myself, I completely agree. Like another famous fried chicken joint in Kentucky, it's made with a "secret" blend of herbs and spices, though this version far outshines the other.

The Lee brothers are also fans of the Greyhound's hot slaw, a lovely concoction of cabbage and carrots cooked up in a skillet and tossed with hot vinegar and salty chunks of bacon. Also add to your culinary bucket list the Greyhound's famous onion rings, made with slices of sweet onion so thick that I'll bet the chef can only get two rings per onion.

Not all of the dishes here are as gut-busting or decadent as the ones I just mentioned. In recent years, the Greyhound has added some lighter, healthier options to the menu, including a Mediterranean chicken and a dish called Pasta Gabriel with angel hair pasta tossed with vegetables and a garlic and olive oil sauce.

Older means better

It's safe to say the Greyhound skews to an older crowd. But that's what I like about it. Once you reach your 50s, older crowds are who you want to be around. Not only do they make you feel young, but they're also a reminder that getting old doesn't have to be a drag if you play your cards right.

The dining rooms, with their tasteful antiques and pastel printed wallpaper, give the place a cheery nostalgic vibe that can make every visit feel like Easter Sunday. A more casual atmosphere can be found in the wood-paneled tavern room where men and women in polo shirts and button-downs drink frosty glasses of beer, watch sports and comfort old

friends with bear hugs or simple pats on the back beneath the soft glow of deer-antler chandeliers and schoolhouse lights.

Dog-gone good

The reason why the Greyhound is called the Greyhound is because of a man named Benny Frisch. When Benny's brother, Al, expressed interest in purchasing a tiny Dixie Highway sandwich shop called the Dixie Tea Room in the 1930s, his benevolent brother Benny agreed to be its primary investor. As a show of gratitude, Al renamed the place the Greyhound Grill to honor Henry's livelihood, running a successful greyhound training business down in Florida.

The Dixie Tea Room was founded in 1921 by an entrepreneur named Johnny Hauer, and it was located in a prime spot right next to the terminus of a streetcar line that ran from Cincinnati to Fort Mitchell. The part of Dixie Highway that the Tea Room occupied was part of "Gourmet Row," a stretch of restaurants, bars and clubs, many featuring fireplaces and knotty pine walls, that included the Golden Goose, Oelsner's Colonial Tavern, the Hearthstone and the Lookout House.

Sadly, the Gourmet Row's golden era didn't last. As writer Liz McEwen wrote in a 2018 article for the online publication NKY Thrives, "Over the next sixty years, first-ring suburbs like Fort Mitchell began to change. Populations and investment dispersed from urban centers, the region's streetcar system was dismantled, and highway systems emerged with people hurrying past these charming commuter towns rather than stopping to visit."

Around 1988, the Greyhound Grill was sold to Butch Wainscott and Bill Remke (owner of Remke grocery stores). Wainscott, who – along with his wife, Mary Ann, and their seven children – took over running it for the next 30 or so years, changing its name to the Greyhound Tavern, adding a few more dining rooms and turning it into the slightly upscale, Southern-themed restaurant it is today.

In 2020, the Wainscotts sold the Greyhound to Gary Holland of One Holland Restaurant Group. At first, it seemed like an odd pairing given that One Holland was known primarily for owning several LaRosa's and Skyline Chili franchises. Good thing Holland grew up going to the Greyhound. He knew what people loved about it; he knew what he loved about it. So, aside from a few updates and menu adjustments here and there, he's kept it pretty much the same.

And the famous Wainscott family touch is still here, with Gabe Wainscott staying on as general manager to make sure the Greyhound stays on track. (Incidentally, Gabe's brother, Brad, is now the owner of another great Northern Kentucky restaurant, Libby's Southern Comfort, in Covington.)

Back for supper

After our brunch at the Greyhound, I couldn't wait to return for more. Though this time I wanted to do it without the kid in tow. (No offense, Sylvia. I promise I'll take you back soon.)

When I asked my friend, Dave, if he and his wife, Renee, would join Amy and me there for dinner, they immediately agreed and not because they loved the restaurant (they'd never been), but because they liked the name. Their family dog, Westco, is a greyhound, you see, one they rescued from an Alabama race track more than a decade ago. He's a sweet dog, a gentle dog, and – based on my visits to Dave and Renee's house – a very flatulent dog as well.

I've known Dave since my sophomore year at Turpin High School, where we both ran cross country. We also shared a house together at Ohio State, where he and Renee originally met and fell starry-eyed in love.

Dave and I lost track of each other but he was one of those old high school friends I missed a lot without ever quite realizing it. So it was a relief when, after I moved back to Cincinnati in 2019, we were able to pick up our friendship right where we left off, sharing 12-packs of Moosehead on the porch and recalling the highs and lows of the two decades we lost touch.

Renee's calming demeanor along with Dave's loquaciousness and rapid-fire quips make them perfect dinner companions. So the only thing that proved difficult that night was choosing from the Greyhound's greatest hits list of downhome cuisine.

The easiest call for me was the bourbon slush since (it is said) the bourbon slush was invented here at the Greyhound. Its creator was Gabe Wainscott's grandmother, Marian Hellmann, who, according to an old Kentucky Monthly article, "always kept a batch in her freezer, just in case company came by." We also agreed on an order of those onion rings and a special beer cheese and pretzel appetizer with one of the best, more flavorful beer cheeses I've tasted in some time.

Renee, who has some dietary restrictions, worked with our waiter to figure out some doable options and ended up going with the salmon harvest salad. Amy ordered the walleye, which surprised me since, as a native of the lake town of Vermilion, Ohio, she has *very* strong opinions when it comes to walleye (and don't even get her started on perch). She had no complaints, noting how the batter was surprisingly light, flaky and downright tasty.

Dave went with the chicken cordon bleu sandwich, which made me a little jealous since I have an almost obsessive love of chicken cordon bleu that goes back to my childhood. But I was more than satisfied with my decision to order the meatloaf, a hearty portion that came with a mess of grandma-style smothered green beans with a nice punch of vinegar.

Soon enough I found out that the Greyhound does have a few changes planned for the future. Several of the dining rooms have been updated with modern light fixtures, handsome banquets and new floors.

When Wainscott told me the Williamsburg Room, where I sat during both visits to the Greyhound, was next, I worried a bit. I like the classic Colonial-era atmosphere of the room and would hate to see it modernized. After all, the worst thing you can do to a classic old restaurant that's built as much on memories as it is the food on the menu is modernize it. But he assured me that, aside from some new floors, it will look basically the same.

As for the menu itself, I hope that they stick to the Kentucky classics. Because one of the things I love most about living in Cincinnati is that we still have access to all the hot browns, beer cheese and fried chicken the South has to offer.