

Food, flicks coming together at several theaters north of Boston



MARK LORENZ FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

By **Kathy Shiels Tully** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT FEBRUARY 08, 2015

For Heidi Bassler, going to the movies with her husband and two children at the end of a long week is a treat. Especially when it is at Chunky's Cinema Pub in Haverhill, where the family of four can sit — in comfy, oversized seats taken from Lincoln Town Cars — and watch a movie together while eating dinner.

“It’s easy for the kids, it’s easy for us,” said Bassler, of West Newbury, while waiting for her family’s food to be served before the lights went down for “Paddington,” a movie about a bear and his adventures.

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“Yeah, it’s ‘Paddington,’ ” said Bassler, slightly rolling her eyes. “But after working all week, we want to be with the kids. That’s a date night for us.”

That same night, Dave Rubenstein of Beverly and Jessica Bosse of Amesbury were at Chunky’s on a date, but with a more sophisticated dinner than chicken fingers, the R-rated “American Sniper” and adult drinks in mind, offered in another screening room.

It was Rubenstein’s first time to the dine-in theater and “years since I’ve been here,” said Bosse, as she scanned for the best seating.

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Where to eat while going to the movies north of Boston

Get a taste of the dine-in movie experience at these locations.

Trying the dine-in movie experience at Chunky’s

The Town Car seating gives Chunky’s its own special effect.

“We purchased the business from the previous owner, who owned a limousine company and had an excess of [limousine] chairs,” said Allen Coburn, who co-owns three Chunky’s, the others in Nashua and Pelham, N.H. “We like to think of it like flying first class.”

“I like to eat and watch movies,” said Hailey Nichols, 5½, while eating her chicken fingers. “And the chairs. They’re big and comfy and come from cars.”

Hailey's parents, Danielle and Matt, came from Tewksbury and also brought their two young sons: Jackson, 15 months, and Jayce, 10 weeks, who was attending his first movie in his own car seat.

"I love coming here," said Matt. "Nothing compares to it. For us, it'd cost about \$100 to go to a [multiplex] movie theater. Here, it's about \$70 for tickets and a meal. That's a huge difference.

"You get the best of both worlds," he added, sipping his beer.



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Travis Green is served a hearty meal at Chunky's Cinema Pubs in Haverhill.

For little more than the cost of a bucket of popcorn and a super-sized soda, the dine-in movie experience — combining yummy food, umbrella drinks, and plush seating — can for a few hours make a moviegoer feel like the super-wealthy or even a celebrity.

At Cinema Salem, a four-screen independent community theater in the historic downtown, movie-lovers sit in traditional seats to watch first-run feature films, art films, and documentaries.

Instead of meals, moviegoers can enjoy locally made pastries and a long list of coffee drinks, many with movie-themed names like “Princess Leia,” “Vanilla Sky,” and “La Dolce Vita.” (\$3.50-\$4.25). It also has a concession stand, but does not serve alcohol.

“I’m not a fan of alcohol in the theater,” said Kereth Cowe-Spigai, who has been Cinema Salem’s manager since 2007. “It makes people talk. The whole key [to the dine-in experience] is that it has to be unobtrusive.”

AMC Theatres — which has more than 5,000 screens in about 350 theaters nationwide — is all over the concept.

Last May, AMC opened Assembly Row 12 in Somerville’s hip, new neighborhood, with luxury seating and food/drink from its Marketplace. Patrons choose from Philly steak sandwiches, hot dogs with various toppings, pizzas, and more, then carry it into a screening room. There are also beer and wine at a separate bar, along with specialty martinis, margaritas, or other cocktails to bring into the movie. Customers can choose either powered recliner seats or plush rockers.



BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

Moviegoers prepared to watch American Sniper.

“In the old days you’d think popcorn, soda, and candy,” said Ryan Noonan, AMC director of corporate communications, from the company’s headquarters in Leawood, Kan. “And that was pretty much it. But we discovered that guests want more than that and that we can provide a better experience by providing more delicious food options.”

At Marblehead’s Warwick Cinema, Kim Knoepfel, who lives in town, treated her sons, Miles Smith, 12, and brother Bodie, 7, along with their two cousins to dinner while they saw “Paddington.”

“It’s our favorite theater,” said Knoepfel. “I’m a freak for the theater. And they have the best chicken fingers [served with honey mustard and house fries] you’ve ever eaten in your life.”

They saw the movie in Warwick's screening room, which has a number of rectangular tables and swivel office chairs that can be rearranged to fit a family or group of friends. A long counter cuts across the middle of the room, which makes it easy to eat and watch.

"When you add on the price of a baby sitter," said Knoepfel, a single mom, "why not have dinner, too?"

Miles said he like the seats better in Warwick's luxury cinema, "where you can fold out a table, like on an airplane."

"They should all be like this," Knoepfel said.



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The lounge area in between Warwick Cinema and the restaurant at Warwick Place complex in Marblehead.

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