

Patio Palates

Four places where the fare and the outdoor spaces are equal draws

BY PAT TANNER

BERNARDS INN: THE TERRACE

27 Mine Brook Road
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★★★★

Given that the Bernards Inn offers one of the prettiest dining rooms in the state and flawless service, why choose to dine outside, on busy Mine Brook Road? The main reason is the bar menu. Who knew that the inn, a bastion of elegance, had some of the best bar food around, including a burger that I'd put up against any?

By choosing to alight on the romantic, stone-balustrade terrace, you can easily imagine you're a golden-age tycoon who just arrived at your stately residence by train. (Which, in fact, can be done. The turn-of-the-century station is directly across the street.) In reality, you'll be dining on the inn's front porch and perched at ornate, white wrought-iron tables and chairs — comfortably padded, naturally — with massive stone planters full of cascading flowers on one side and the inn's impressive stone facade on the other.

It's not that the bar menu contains anything unexpected. It's that every choice is exemplary. Take that burger. At \$17 it had darn well better deliver — and it does. Its fresh, never-frozen beef is handled delicately, seared to order, topped with a thin layer of Vermont white cheddar, and tucked into an

oversize brioche bun along with apple wood-smoked bacon and sautéed Vidalia onions. Better still, the burger is paired with addictive lemon-pepper shoestring fries. Heck, I think \$17 is a bargain.

The kitchen is under the direction of Executive Chef Corey Heyer, who took over the reins from Ed Stone a couple of years ago. Heyer and staff have seamlessly maintained the inn's reputation for excellence.

I began my meal with butter-lettuce salad with a creamy lemon tarragon vinaigrette. Sounds innocent enough, but wait: Bits of silky smoked salmon and crispy bacon make it downright decadent. A more pristine option is oysters on the half shell. We opted for two wonderfully briny specimens each from Prince Edward Island, Maine, and Long Island.

Judging by surrounding tables, the lobster ravioli with pea shoots is a fan favorite. I chose instead the Maryland crab cake, which turned out to be one fat patty with lots of meat but timid flavor, despite touches of whole-grain mustard and tomato oil.

The inn's exceptional wine list, all 820 selections, is at the diner's disposal. The by-the-glass selection is notable for its breadth and depth: 40 premium, interesting wines. We chose two fine Californians: 2004 Grove Street pinot noir from Carneros and 2003 Domaine Alfred Chamisal Vineyard chardonnay from Edna Valley.

The dessert menu is identical to the one found inside, but out on the terrace it seems right to go with something unfussy. The house-made angel food cake with fresh berries and whipped cream makes an ideal choice, especially since all meals conclude with a tray of irresistible after-dinner treats.

The dining room's haute cuisine is also available out on the terrace, but when a more casual dining experience is in order, this bar food can't be beat.