

### Restaurant Review

# Bernards Inn

**T**HE stylish Bernards Inn gets the details right while making it look easy. The atmosphere is welcoming, the cuisine elegantly straightforward, the service professional and seemingly effortless. From the first greeting to the final bonbon, presented just before the (possibly extravagant) bill, the pace of the meal is relaxed, the service considerate and the food delightful.

Executive Chef Corey W. Heyer changes the menu seasonally and keeps it brief: the five starters on the summer menu included foie gras, carpaccio, sashimi and braised pork belly. Among the nine entrées were roast chicken, rack of lamb, salmon cannelloni, and black sea bass. These are supplemented by weekly specials, among them heirloom tomato salad (grown in the Inn's garden), beef tenderloin, vegetarian lemon risotto, and flaked rice-coated fluke. Servers were solicitous in asking diners' opinions of this dish — a tryout for the fall menu. (The dish made the cut: it is on the menu that debuted Sept. 17, but halibut replaces the fluke.)

In contrast to the compact dining menu, the wine list stretches to 50 pages, the cellar holds 12,500 bottles, and 50 wines are available by the glass. These include vintages from Hungary, Greece, Austria, Argentina, Michigan and Idaho, as well as more familiar wine-producing regions. Prices by the glass range from \$6.95 to \$22.25.

On a quiet Sunday evening, we had chosen a table in the bar. An octagonal dark-wood bar dominates the room. Arched windows open to the front porch, where outside dining is available. Inside, tables are arranged on a raised platform around two sides of the handsome room, walls covered in neutral fabric, accented by dark wood and heavy, plantation-style blinds.

Service was notable. The server who brought our water knew which of us had expressed a preference for tap and which for sparkling — even though he had not taken the order. When pouring, he took care to shield against splashes with a napkin held in his left hand.

The pace of the meal was leisurely. Once drinks were served we were left alone for conversation before the menus were delivered. Throughout the evening, we enjoyed the performance of a pianist at a baby grand, providing a medley of favorites, some jazzy, some schmaltzy, a light classic or two, and two performances of "Happy Birthday."



TIMEOFF PHOTOS/FRANK WOJCIECHOWSKI

From the first greeting to the final bonbon, the pace of the meal here is relaxed and the food delightful.

Before we ordered, the kitchen sent out a small cup of chilled white asparagus soup with lemon chives. Its velvety consistency and subtle sweetness evoked fine vichyssoise, and a salty tang lingered on the palate. The deep, nutty flavor of a sprinkling of almond powder added another dimension.

A half serving of the special lemon risotto entrée (\$14) — provided without hesitation at our request — made a fine appetizer. The creamy rice, brilliantly spiked with lemon zest, was topped with bias-cut asparagus. A vegetarian dish, it had been cooked in water and smoothed with parmesan cheese.

Day boat scallops (\$15) were served on a white platter with a green swish of basil emulsion brushed across it. The three large scallops were golden-brown, firm but silky textured. They were complemented by a small salad dressed with a balsamic reduction.

Filet of fluke coated with rice flakes (\$34) was pan-roasted in grape seed oil and finished with butter, but had a heavy texture that suggested undercooking. The flaky coating gave each bite a delightful crunch. Dots of warm-hued piquillo pepper lent a touch of heat to the delicate almond sauce. Hot pepper lovers might wish the piquillos had a spicier octane. The dish was brightened with sliced sweet peppers, exceptionally delicate haricots verts, and grapes, and accented by a red pepper vinaigrette.

The 14- to 16-ounce grain-fed veal chop (\$44) was meltingly tender and served with a paper-thin slice of crisp prosciutto. Accompanied by small portions of spinach, mushrooms and herb gnocchi, the dish offered a variety of tastes founded on the savory, almost beef-taste savory of the veal. Forty-four dollars is a startling price for a veal chop. But as the Michelin guide famously characterizes fine restaurants: "Specialties and wines of first-class quality. This will be reflected in the price."

We concluded with a dessert and a cheese course. Summery peach brûlée (\$10) is infused with a peach purée added to the custard before baking. It is served with a triangle of puff pastry with peach slices — also "brûléed" — with a twist of pastry dusted with raspberry and almonds. The selection of three cheeses (\$12) included German Hirtenkäse, comparable to Jarlsberg, Ser-

pa, a Portuguese sheep cheese, and semisoft Morbier, a French cows' milk cheese. The slices of cheese were artfully interspersed with shimmering blocks of jellied quince as a palate cleanser. A slightly sweet and nutty Graham 10-year port (\$9) was a good companion for the cheese.

After dessert, we finished our espresso with four exquisite bonbons sent out from the kitchen. One peanut butter-chocolate confection induced an audible groan of appreciation.

### Bernards Inn

27 Mine Brook Road  
Bernardsville  
(908) 766-0002  
www.bernardsinn.com

**Food** Excellent

**Service** Professional, thoughtful and pleasant

**Prices** Appetizers \$15-\$23; soup and salads \$10-\$18; entrées \$28-\$44; desserts \$10-\$12

**Cuisine** "Progressive American." A tasting menu is available, with or without wine pairings.

**Hours** Breakfast: Mon.-Sat. 6:30-10 a.m., Sun. 7-11 a.m.; Lunch: 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m.; Dinner: Mon. 5:30 p.m.-10 p.m., Fri.-Sat. 5:30-11 p.m., Sun. 5:30-9 p.m.

**Ambience** Casually elegant (jackets required), well-appointed dining rooms and bar. Small front porch offers outdoor dining.

**Vegan/vegetarian** The menu always lists two vegetarian appetizers. The summer menu offered spicy tomato gazpacho and heirloom tomato salad. Entrée specials also include a vegetarian choice.

**Essentials** Reservations recommended (may be made via the Inn's Web site). Accepts most credit cards. Extensive wine list. Wheelchair accessible. Parking on street or in nearby, free lots. Outdoor dining in season.