

The Right Ingredients

BY MADISON STAHL

Much ado has been made of the 100th anniversary of the Bernards Inn. And for good reason. All those adjectives other restaurants casually throw around — elegant, charming, sumptuous — actually apply here. And for those who might worry that “centennial” and “historic” are simply code words for “quaint with a musty George-Washington-slept-here aura,” well, you needn’t be concerned. If this is a blue-blood inn, it’s Jackie O. blue blood.

Thanks to recent renovations by Jeffrey Haines of Far Hills, the restaurant manages to be genteel without being stuffy. White tablecloths, stone fireplaces, high ceilings, gleaming woodwork and brisk-colored walls, the piano bar, the stone terrace lush with greens — this place has such a gracious old-Hollywood feel, you almost expect to see Grace Kelly or Humphrey Bogart at the next table. This feels like a restaurant for men who wear silk pocket squares and women in couture gowns.

In silk or not, you are one of those beautiful people when you dine here. Clearly the staff works hard to ensure that everyone is treated like a celebrity. Our service was impeccable; the staff is subdued and attentive, and we felt like royalty.

The chef here is Corey W. Heyer, who has an impressive résumé — he’s worked at the Fromagerie in Rumson, Restaurant Nicholas in Red Bank and Restaurant Daniel in New York City. Heyer’s goal is that trifecta of fine dining — great ambience, great service, great food — for a New Jersey clientele he says has become increasingly sophisticated about food during the past 10 years or so. The expectations of his customers, many of whom work and also dine in Manhattan, are high.

The beginning of the meal was grand. The amuse bouche — that bite-sized complementary dish served before the meal, which often offers a first glimpse of the chef’s skill and creativity — was delightful. Ours was champagne grapes served with goat cheese and balsamic vinegar. And with a wine list that’s won awards from Wine Spectator, we felt off to an auspicious start. Along with its a la carte listings, the restaurant offers a five-course tasting menu (\$85) of two appetizers, two entrees and a dessert. For appetizers, we chose the himachi sashimi and the gazpacho. The sashimi, served with honeydew melon and jicama salad, scallion and a ginger vinaigrette, was fresh, delicate, almost translucent.

The few diced melon, jicama and scallion pieces were more garnish than accompaniment. The gazpacho was served with Alaskan king crab, lemon oil and avocado mousse; it was advertised as spicy on the menu, but we found it quite mild. The tomatoes were fresh, but the soup lacked spark.

From the a la carte menu, we ordered the grilled Hawaiian saltwater prawns (\$17), served with couscous salad. Our three large prawns were slightly underdone, but the couscous salad was nice.

For entrees from the tasting menu, we chose the organic Scottish salmon and the lavender-glazed Long Island duck. The salmon itself was delicious and perfectly done; it was served with green and white asparagus, lemon-scented quinoa and roasted porcini mushrooms. But the kitchen seemed stingy with the accompaniments; the mushrooms were very good, but there were so few of them, and they were chopped into tiny pieces.

The few bites of asparagus lacked flavor. The duck was our best entrée — perhaps because duck is intrinsically more intense and gamey. It was served with warm honey-marinated peaches.

Our a la carte entrée was the prime tenderloin of beef (\$40), served with crème fraîche potatoe puree, sweet carrots and a syrah and shallot sauce. Here again, the beef itself was top-notch, but the preparation didn’t do it justice. It was very good, but not spectacular — although we had the impression it easily could have been. We found the potatoes far too airy and bland, with none of the oompf and energy you expect from real potatoes.

Indeed, we found the same problem throughout the meal — the ingredients seemed top-notch, but the dish itself was not. Sometimes the whole was not greater than the sum of its parts, as if each element were a separate entity and not part of a cohesive whole. Other times it seemed as if the ingredients were not prepared in a way that showed off their greatest potential. They simply lacked energy.

The end of the meal, however, was redemptive.

The coffees were rich and strong, the cheese plate, with four artisan cheeses, was delicious. Our chocolate/apricot dessert sampling was excellent, and the classic crème brulee with Tahitian vanilla beans was a step above the usual crème brulee. The pastry chef here is Duane Hendershot, who deserves kudos not just for the desserts but for the generous small plate of truffles and tiny cakes served at the end of the meal.

Chef Heyer says he wants the end of the meal to be a flourish, and here he is successful. He should demand just as much bold energy for the rest of the meal.