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 or Humphrey Bogart at the next table. 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.

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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.

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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.