

Bernards Inn delivers delectable dishes with panache

FINE DINING

The Bernards Inn

27 Mine Brook Road (Route 202), Bernardsville. Lunch: 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Mondays-Fridays. Dinner: 5:30-10 p.m. Mondays-Thursdays, 5:30-11 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays, 5-9 p.m. Sundays. Full bar. Major credit cards. Business casual attire; jackets suggested on Saturday nights. Wheelchair accessible. Reservations recommended: (908) 766-0002. www.bernardsinn.com.

★★★★

BY GODY KENDALL
FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

The lustrous brochure that touts the attributes of the Bernards Inn cites its “enduring elegance.”

That is as good a way as any to describe the character of this establishment, built 101 years ago as a deluxe retreat for the carriage trade. All the standards are high here, from the solicitous service that doesn't skip a beat to the live piano music, which provides an appropriate nightly soundtrack for the top-caliber restaurant.

While the inn has quite a history, its food has kept up with the times and the establishment's high standards, evolving over the past few years under the capable direction of executive chef Corey Heyer. Chef de cuisine Craig Polignano, whose credits include the old Ryland Inn, joined the staff last fall.

A re-do of the Bernards Inn's interior in 2007 for the establishment's 100th anniversary “forced us at every level to step it up a notch,” said Heyer, explaining “we're very much more aggressive with our creativity.”

That doesn't mean weird food or outlandish combinations of ingredients. Instead, the concept offers a different take on the type of dishes you'd expect to have here, with accompaniments that are as interesting as the main elements on the plate.

A perfect example was the roulade of pheasant special (\$36) that glorified the bird with a compilation of foie gras, black truffles, chantarelle mushrooms and a celery root puree on the side. This was exquisite indulgence, a creation exemplifying in food what the inn stands for — top quality combined with sophistication and inspiration.

Day boat Florida grouper (\$34) is served over a crisp rosti potato (a thick type of potato pancake) with an anchovy and caper vinaigrette artfully linking melted leeks and porcini mushrooms.

Specials come and go, of course, and the menu changes seasonally, aided in warm weather by fresh herbs from the inn's garden in Bedminster. Some items, however, are perennials, though the way they're prepared may vary. One of the regulars is the crispy suckling pig (\$36), served this fall with apple puree and bacon-wrapped peanut butter-stuffed dates.

The 28-day dry-aged sirloin (\$48) attended by a horseradish/lemon butter comes with a marvelous kohlrabi and black truffle potato gratin. Almond puree and red pepper vinaigrette enhance the rice flake-encrusted halibut (\$34). Mashed rutabaga, red Swiss chard and black trumpet mushrooms are the flourishes on the Griggstown Farm chicken (\$28) that make it a meal.

To start off, the grilled porcini and eggplant puff pastry tart gets an edge from herbed goat cheese — not too much, just enough — and caramelized onions. A scattering of lettuce on top combined the attributes of salad with something more substantial.

Toasted pumpkin seeds, a sage brown butter sauce and black truffle pecorino embellish sweet potato ravioli (\$15) in pasta packages as soft as a baby's cheek. The sweetness melts into the savory in a perfect marriage.

I wasn't as certain about the re-

lationship between the roasted butternut squash soup (\$10) and the espresso marshmallows that were its floating centerpiece. The sweetness quotient, including the cinnamon-spiced pecans, was a little too high for me on this one. Uncertain of how to eat it, I first dipped my spoon into the marshmallow, then into the soup. Finally, I swirled it all together and liked it better, but it still seemed more like dessert than a starter to me.

The lobster bisque (\$11) on the other hand, with its brioche crouton, was an exercise in excellent restraint that was marvelous. Bisques can often be too thick and gluey, this was neither.

The wine list, under the leadership of wine director Terri Baldwin, is a vast global array with dizzying potential. There are six pages devoted to cabernet sauvignon alone. Don't worry if you're not a wine maven. The staff is happy to walk you through the choices so you can make the right selection.

But if you'd prefer to pick the wine yourself and are on a limited budget, try the wine flights. Each flight offers three glasses of two-ounce pours, and is a great way to experience something new; perhaps as a precursor to ordering a full glass or a bottle. There is a delightful flight of whites for \$8.50 that includes a muscat-like Hungarian selection, the White Haven sauvignon blanc from New Zealand and a relatively dry riesling.

By the glass, the choices and pricing are both wide-ranging. At the top of the pile is the Kistler Les Noisetiers chardonnay (\$26.25), but there are many glasses available at lesser prices down to \$6. There are even seven nonalcoholic wines (\$3 to \$4.25), an unusually large number.

Desserts by Duane Hendershot, previously of the Grand Colonial in Hunterdon County, have abundant



GEORGE McNISH/THE STAR-LEDGER

The main dining room of the Bernards Inn. The inn was built 101 years ago.

flair. The burnt orange deep, dark chocolate truffle tart (\$11) with a wave of meringue on top and cardamom ice cream belongs on the buffet table in heaven. The apple dumpling (\$11) with honey ice cream and pumpkin creme brulee (\$10) are most appropriate at this time of year. Ice cream and sorbets (\$9), made in house, are a nice light alternative.

The way we were treated on our visit to the inn made us feel as if we were the only patrons in the room. A glance around assured me that was not so, as the other well-spaced tables were filled, but we wanted for nothing during our evening at the inn.

On another occasion, I dined at a table in the bar area near the pianist, and received the same type of attention, even though we ordered only a few items and some drinks.

Those who want to experience

the inn but have neither the appetite nor the budget for a full meal should try the bar alternative. It has some of the smaller items available from the dining room, and also a few dishes that are its own. The black truffle macaroni and cheese with pheasant meatballs (\$14), for instance, is a cute little number that combines fine dining nuances with a sturdy American favorite.

One dining room is adjacent to the bar; the other, rather more lavishly appointed, is farther away. I like being close to the piano and found the noise level in that vicinity to be very satisfactory, despite its proximity to the bar.

Rather than being hamstrung by tradition, the Bernards Inn has developed into the type of restaurant that works in today's parameters without losing its classic style. Jackets for men are suggested for Saturday night in the dining

rooms. The key word here is "suggested." Saturday does tend to attract a dressy group, but you won't be turned away if you appear in business casual attire.

This place is flexible. Although it is still a favorite haunt of the Somerset Hills establishment crowd, the inn also serves a spectrum of patrons well beyond the descendants of the carriage trade customers who were its original target audience.

It certainly is a place for a special occasion, but don't reserve your visits for those times alone. Any dinner at the Bernards Inn is a celebration of fine food, wine and service.

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