



A Serious Chef and Staff make a Difference

By Patricia Brooks

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The long-running Inn at Ridgefield is now Bernard's inn at Ridgefield, with new ownership, new chef, staff and decor. This means a lighter, fresher look and a staff that is alert and attentive. Even more important are the beguiling menu and food befitting the 21st century. We appreciated extra touches like the fresh cut flowers on each table, the lagniappe served before dinner and delicious petit fours as a finale. One pleasant reminder of times past is the live piano music on Friday and Saturday evenings and at Sunday Brunch.

Citing all the dishes that made our various visits memorable is impossible in this limited space. Top honors went to Bernard's heavenly signature foie-gras trio. Duck liver prepared three ways: sautéed, poached with Sauternes gelée and smoked with horseradish aspic, made an exquisite threesome!

Two renderings of soft-shell crab were almost as impressive. As a starter, two small crisply sautéed crabs came with a fondue of leeks and peppers in a tantalizing ginger sauce. Another evening the crabs starred as an entree in a delicate fennel-accented sauce, accompanied by ramp (wild baby leeks) and sea beans (resembling baby asparagus, with a distinctive tangy taste), garnished with tongues of paper-thin crispy potato chips. Soups were in a class by themselves. A menu regular is green lentil with a mosaic of vegetables, bite-size golden croutons and smoked duck (its smokiness added a special dimension). One night's special was green pea, a lovely puree with a tiny foie-gras float. Another time we took pleasure in a creamy asparagus puree with an island of ethereal corn custard.

As starters, both crispy sautéed sweetbreads (served with pea greens, green pea ravioli and a ceps mushroom sauce) and French wild asparagus with Oregon morels and a crisp feuilleté garnish teased and delighted our taste buds. The use of unusual fresh vegetables seems to be the chef Bernard Bouissou's signature.

While there are flashier dishes on the menu, the crispy roasted free-range chicken set new standards for a crisp-skinned, moist and tender bird. It was surrounded by haricots verts,



Sarah's
Wine Bar

ACCOLADES

roasted cipolini onions, a portion of zucchini stuffed with vegetables and excellent mashed potatoes in lemon-thyme sauce.

Another superstar was baked baby black seabass. Moist and delicate, filled with tomatoes, cured and marinated Provencal black olives and capers, it was served over house-made green basil linguine with a complex and gratifying tomato-fennel compote and fennel sauce, garnished with fresh basil. Filets of Dover sole, bedecked with New Zealand cockles, celery root, carrots and potatoes, was yet another seafood delicacy. Its fine herbes nages, a creamily luscious sauce, enhanced without upstaging the delicately textured fish.

The chef's fine hand with seafood wavered only once, in the grilled tournedos of salmon, which turned out overcooked and dry. Fortunately, the accompanying haricots verts, creamy polenta in a hazelnut sauce and Belgian endive meuniere, were so savory we hardly minded the disappointment of the salmon.

Desserts, like almost everything at this stellar inn, were excellent, from a paper-thin crisp-layered strawberry Napoleon, with luscious big ripe berries, to a silken chocolate espresso mousse with coffee sauce and three crisp tuiles. Also excellent were a thin crust apple tart, served with anise ice cream and anise honey, and baroque layered chocolate-peanut butter opera in crème anglaise. Best of all was fondant au chocolate, with its intense, superior chocolate and soft runny interior.

Dinner for two, three courses a piece, cost \$80, before tax, tip and drinks, which was not outrageous considering the quality of the food and the dining experience. A well-chosen, extensive wine list, mostly French and west Coast American, begins at \$22.