

At Fiddleheads, the party goes on night after night

Home News Tribune Online 06/14/07

By GENE RACZ
STAFF WRITER
gracz@thnt.com



There's a smattering of businessmen and older ladies among the bustling lunchtime crowd at Jamesburg's Fiddleheads Restaurant. They've come for the varied midday menu of sandwiches, salads and entrees — prepared with a chef's touch — with prices competitive with area diners.

It's a typical Friday afternoon at the long-standing eatery on Railroad Avenue, and chef Dan Davis is doing his thing in the kitchen as manager Brian Blatz and staff look after patrons out on the floor.

The tablecloths are white, the music is light and the paintings and photographs by local artists adorning the walls are for sale.

Dinners at Fiddleheads have a much more relaxed ambiance and are meant to be as much of a satiating overall experience as a high-end meal. When evening rolls around, Davis will unleash an impressive range of culinary creations which has helped earn an "excellent" rating from Zagat's 2006 restaurant guide.

Saturday will mark the third anniversary of ownership under Blatz and Davis. Their passion as hosts has garnered a dedicated base of customers who have come to appreciate fine food served with a personal touch.

Davis says he makes an effort at every dinner to come out to each table to chat with the patrons — provided he's not too swamped at the stove. Blatz, a former publishing-house editor, prides himself on remembering names and wants people to enjoy having an "away" experience that's pleasantly different from the work-a-day grind.

"Our theme when we first bought the place was, "We're having a party here every night and you're all invited," said Blatz, 40, who grew up in East Brunswick. "As partners in this restaurant, we feel as though we're having people over to a special place where they feel as special guests." Davis, 52, hails from Montana but has been out East for about 20 years. The influence of the Rockies can be detected in some of his occasional wild-game dishes. "The Big Sky" rib steak is a dead giveaway to his West-of-the-Mississippi roots.

Sitting quietly in a white T-shirt over coffee shortly before the restaurant opens, Davis says he usually arrives two hours before lunch (served 11:30 to 2:30 Wednesday through Friday) and that he'll shop for fresh ingredients before coming in.

His self-taught culinary skills may best be described as polished and permissive.

Continued on next page

“I always tell people it’s fun to play with food — to find out different combinations,” said Davis. “Just play, that’s what I do, that’s how I come up with a dish. I’ll start out with a main ingredient and just play.”

“I want (my customers’) expectations to be met of having a nice relaxed dinner with good food.”

Davis’ gourmet creations can be quite unique. Case in point is the clientele favorite “Yellowfin Tuna with Bacon Buckles,” in which seared fish is wrapped in bacon with parmesan and horseradish under it. The result was a surprisingly subtle special of the day that found its way to the top of the regular dinner menu. Also popular with dinner clientele are the Shrimp Louisiana, Rack of Lamb, and Veal in Pistachio Crust.

Sitting with Davis over morning coffee, Blatz can’t help but brag a little about the special vendor who provides desserts at Fiddleheads — his mom. Mother of six, Bettie Blatz cranks out a rotation of about 14 to 15 items. Brian is partial to her almond amaretto cheesecake.

“I got a note sent home once through me — someone filled it out and sent it home to my mom about her cranberry bread pudding,” said Blatz. He pointed out that Davis is very happy to let Mom do the baking.

Blatz notes that the premises of Fiddleheads has been used as a restaurant in one form or another since the 1940s. They bought it from a previous owner who also called it Fiddleheads, and they made a seamless transition in ownership and service three years ago.

And speaking of fiddleheads, Blatz and Davis just ended “fiddlehead” season with several seasonal menu items which included the hard-to-procure, edible fern. Davis special ordered a few boxes of fiddleheads from Canada and upper New England where they’re harvested in the woods and the wild like morels. Davis rolled out an entree “Antelope Medallions with Wild Fiddleheads” as one of his creations.

Fiddleheads Restaurant serves a Sunday brunch 10:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. Dinner hours are 5-9 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday and 5-10 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and 4-8 p.m. on Sunday. The restaurant, which is BYOB, closes Monday and Tuesday.

Blatz says he uses an extensive e-mail list of about 800 to 900 addresses “to keep people plugged into this place” regarding specials or events. The restaurant will host an occasional supper club with a cabaret night and harvest-related events with a local winemaker. An alcove in the back of the L-shape eatery seats about 20 and is available for private events.

“People are very excited and passionate about this place,” said Blatz. “They may not come every week or month, but when they do, they say, ‘I’m so happy to be here, I love this place.’ If you’re going to own a little restaurant like this, especially independently, you have to be very passionate about it — and that’s what we are.”