

Steakhouse 85: Enjoy dinner and keep your shirt

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MARK DYE/FOR THE STAR

LEDGERCo-owner Matthew "Matty" Terranova with co-owner and chef Brian Karluk at Steakhouse 85 at 85 Church St. in New Brunswick.

Steakhouse 85, 85 Church St., New Brunswick. Hours: 11:30 a.m.-10 p.m. Mondays-Tuesdays, 11:30 a.m.-11 p.m. Fridays, 4-11 p.m. Saturdays, 4-9 p.m. Sundays. Full bar. Major credit cards. Casual dress. Wheelchair accessible. Reservations recommended: (732) 247-8585. www.steakhouse85.com.

THREE AND A HALF STARS

Steakhouse 85 artfully combines two powerful trends into a memorable dining experience that respects both the palate and the pocketbook.

While steakhouses are making a big splash these days, many of them don't cater to people working with tight budgets, the situation in which so many find themselves these days.

Folks who still can afford to pay \$40 for a hand-cut, 16-ounce dry-aged strip steak or \$49 for a 24-ounce garlic/blue cheese-encrusted prime rib Tomahawk Chop (\$49) won't feel slighted, but the alternative for those unable to shell out as much is quite appealing. An 8-ounce "petite" sirloin with roasted garlic dipping sauce, topped by a tangle of shoestring onion rings and accompanied by delectable fries, runs only \$20, a happy choice for all but the biggest appetites. There's a choice of sauces, from Bearnaise and blue cheese to the house steak sauce.

Pinching pennies even further? Go for the black Angus burger (\$12) with your choice of cheese and shoestring fries. Those who want something other than Premium Gold black Angus beef can try the pan-roasted pork tenderloin (\$19) in a bourbon brown sugar glaze. And on Mondays, the special is meatloaf, just \$16.

Want some wine to go with it? Wines by the glass start at \$8, but there's also a list of \$25 bottles, such as the McManus Petite Syrah, in addition to the regular list that includes more pricey possibilities.

Steakhouse 85, which opened in November, is a testimony to the expertise of its owners, chef Brian Karluk and maitre d' Matthew Terranova, both of whom formerly worked at the Witherspoon Grill in

Princeton. They completely redid the former Gaebel's, making it the epitome of a steakhouse in looks and style. American cherry floors and mahogany woodwork are the framework of top-class decor from architect Kurt Ludwig and construction firm Brown & Glynn. A big fireplace catches the eye as the focus of one dining area, where banquettes are set across from the bar, while another handsome room runs perpendicular from there.

The restaurant, which also has two private rooms in the back, seats 280, and will be able to handle 300 when outdoor dining is available during warm weather.

Walking in, we were greeted by the lilting notes of a duo -- a bass and a piano -- delivering light jazz. Live music, which is heard Tuesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, sets just the right tone and doesn't raise the noise level. Karluk said that when groups auditioned, he dismissed anyone who wanted to set up speakers. Good for him; at Steakhouse 85, there's an understanding that patrons would like to hear each other talk.

Service, under general manager Julian Mercado, is poised and intelligent. Our server was available when necessary, could answer questions and had the proper respectful tone when dealing with us.

Karluk, a Culinary Institute of America grad whose mantra here is "keep it simple," says the most innovative thing on the menu is truffle oil. So look for a lot of old favorites, which generally are artfully prepared. Side dishes (\$5) include mac and cheese, pan-roasted asparagus, wonderful creamed spinach that is not too heavy on the cream, and au gratin potatoes, among other choices such as pecan sweet potato casserole.

For starters, there's sherry-spiked clam chowder (\$9), that familiar iceberg lettuce wedge (\$8) with blue cheese, tomatoes and bacon and a shrimp cocktail (\$12). A slightly different take on a seafood appetizer is the jumbo lump crab martini (\$12) with a zingy cocktail sauce and a horseradish/mustard remoulade, as well as a flourish of lemon vodka in the glass for extra kick. The crab was abundant and fresh. The only disappointment we had at the restaurant was the crispy calamari (\$9), which failed to live up to its name; it was a bit limp. The calamari also would have benefited from the same kicky sauce served with the crab; a garlic marinara lacked oomph.

Butternut squash soup (\$8) embodied all the goodness of the vegetable, while a grilled Caesar salad (\$8) had a nice smoky taste to counterpoint the anchovies languidly draped over the romaine.

There are so many appealing entrees from which to choose at this restaurant. Regular daily specials during the week include not only the Monday meatloaf, but also osso bucco (\$26) on Thursdays, zuppa de pesce (\$30) on Fridays and delectable prime rib (\$30) on Saturdays. To avoid misunderstandings, the "cooking legend" is printed on the menu. Thus, when you order your beef medium rare, you'll know it comes with a warm red center, while medium well has a slightly pink center. Our beef choices were cooked exactly as we requested them.

There are plenty of seafood dishes available. An outrageous lobster risotto (\$26) was dazzling with white truffle oil, yet had an edge from shaved Parmigiano. Salmon (\$26) is pistachio-crust, while day boat sea scallops (\$25) are dandies glossed with lemon butter among caramelized leeks and Nueske bacon. Fish specials might include something less expensive, such as a beautifully prepared cod Provencale (\$19). Don't want beef or fish? There's always the rack of lamb (\$35) and at the other end of the scale, the roasted chicken breast (\$22) in a cranberry/cider jus with sweet potato hash.

Desserts are fun, especially the warm chocolate truffles (\$8) in their crispy shells that snap open gently to reveal a sublime melting dark chocolate ganache. An extra-rich version of tiramisu (\$8) should fill any gaps left by the appetizers and entrees, while apple crisp (\$7) with a brown sugar glaze adds just the right

fruity note to dinner. Ice cream (\$6) comes from Princeton's Bent Spoon, which is my all-time favorite. Those seeking something more dramatic may prefer bananas Foster (\$6) sauteed with dark rum.

From start to finish, this spot was a happy experience. As I said in my year-end wrap up for 2008, I consider New Brunswick the best restaurant town in New Jersey. The emergence of Steakhouse 85 makes it even better.

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Comments

nocause says...

Great steaks at a fair price, nicely presented.
A decent wine selection.
The wait staff could be a bit more professional.

Posted on 02/05/09 at 7:50AM

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