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## **Rookie of the year**

By Rachel Forrest

Restaurants constantly open and close and open, and still some months there's just nothing to make me utter an emphatic "wow," no "it" factor or excitement in the food or design, in feel or vibe. Well, hello Mission Oak Grill. Thank you for making my year. I'd been waiting for ages to see what would move into the old Kiwi Grill space in Newburyport, into that wonderfully designed church space I loved, and I'm happy to say it's a restaurant with pizzazz in all aspects -- design, vibe, and best of all cuisine. Just a few little service hiccups but heck, they've been open less than two months at this writing and I think it will all work out.

Mission Oak Grill is lovely inside with dark square wooden columns in the Mission style and many booths with warm brown leather seats as well as slickly polished tables, all of which create a classy but not stuffy feel to the open dining room. The bar is a great place to gather before dinner with an affable group of bartenders all very enthusiastic about their new jobs. Jodi the culinary instructor and constant companion Vicky and I had a great time pumping the bartender for information before dinner.

In the meantime, I went to the hostess table and checked in for our reservation in a half an hour and asked if we could have a booth. The hostess happily figured it out on the computer system and said yes, there would be a booth for us. When it came time to seat us however, she led us to a regular table (like I would forget!) and when I asked about the booth she said something about there being three people at the reception desk and some confusion. So what's the point of a fancy computer system where you can enter names and tables, I wondered?

"Oh well, they'll work it out," I thought as I opened the spectacular wine list and ordered a wonderful Cain Concept Meritage, watching the action in the open kitchen. Executive Chef Jeanne Clements, formerly of some great restaurants, including the Wentworth by the Sea in New Castle, stands outside the kitchen and checks everything that comes out with confidence boosting intensity. Nothing's going to go wrong in that kitchen -- not that we can see at any rate -- and Chef Clements' menu is great as well, each dish with something new and interesting.

We started with the yellowfin tuna tartar with sweet soy caramel, a large portion of finely chopped fresh tuna mixed with a light sweet sauce on top of a cake of sushi rice and a Korean chili sauce with quite a kick (\$12.95). The contrast of sweet and hot was perfect and the tuna was light and creamy in texture.

A Caesar salad was served with a bit of whimsy, the long leaves of baby Romaine dressed in a creamy Caesar dressing with white anchovies and placed in a cone of a tangy and crunchy Asiago cheese crisp. On the side was a fried egg on a soft savory cake, great for mixing into the lettuce when cut up (\$5.95). All the flavors worked well together and the presentation is a lot of fun. Clams Portuguese style was my favorite, tender littlenecks steamed in white wine and tomatoes with a touch of coriander on top of moist fresh bacon (\$9.95). This could have been a small meal in itself, the uncured bacon like a slow roasted pulled pork infused with aromatic, exotic flavors. Vicky said it was like she was back in Portugal again.

And here I have to interject a small service peeve I had. Our waitress was enthusiastic and efficient but she called us every term of endearment in the book -- hon, darling, kids, sweetheart, you guys -- you name it, that was our nickname -- none of which was appropriate for an evening out in a nice restaurant especially in contrast to the dashing Wellington Augusto, the owner who sweeps around the dining room greeting and checking in with diners with genteel grace.

The star on the entrée list here is steak. I found it interesting that there were no lamb or veal selections, but there are a few seafood dishes including the seared diver scallops I made Vicky order (\$23.95). They were spectacular, dusted with Porcini and seared quickly so the flavors sink in but leave the scallops tender and

sweet. The rock shrimp and ham risotto underneath was smoky and creamy and a pile of lightly sautéed rapini greens had just a touch of tang to make them interesting.

My AAA prime rib of beef was a huge 14 oz. and cooked perfectly to my request for medium, infused with so much terrific flavor from a truffled (but not overly truffled) meat just with a hint of garlic that I think it's really the best I've ever had (\$25.95). It was topped with a juicy smoked Portabella mushroom and served with a cake of thin potato slices with too much roasted garlic flavor for my taste, but a good accompaniment to my steak. Next time I'll order a baked potato side with Vermont sea salt butter for a mere \$4.

Our waitress recommended the simply grilled churrasco steak served Brazilian style with a Chimichurri sauce but we weren't in the mood. Jodi ordered the 22 oz. Cowboy steak medium rare, topped with chips of elephant garlic and potato as well as fried carrots all in a veal glaze which gave the tender robust meat an intense flavor (\$29.95). It was one of the more expensive cuts on the menu and I have to say that I was pleasantly surprised at the prices here with such good beef all under \$30 and other entrees as low as \$16. Restaurants in Boston of this ilk would break the bank.

Desserts are also good, a medium rare chocolate cake was warm, gooey and smooth with a nice contrast in a raspberry sorbet. My pots au chocolate had the perfect texture, rich and dense and topped with the interesting addition of a sweet coconut cream and the tropical crème brulée was the right consistency as well, and topped with crisply caramelized bananas (all \$7.50). We didn't get our after-dinner drinks and when I pointed it out to our waitress after the bill came and we were charged for it, she profusely apologized, blamed it on the "runner" and gave us one of our desserts on the house, a smart customer service move. They'll work all that out too, I'm sure, given a bit more time but frankly I'll be back as soon as I can. Yippee. And an emphatic, "wow."

Rachel Forrest is a former restaurant owner who lives in Exeter. Her column appears Wednesdays in iT. Her restaurant review column, Dining Out, appears Thursdays in Spotlight magazine. Hear her on Wine Me Dine Me with co-host Susan Tuveson Fridays at 6 p.m. on WSCA-FM 106.1. She can be reached by e-mail at [rachelforrest1@aol.com](mailto:rachelforrest1@aol.com).

### **Mission Oak Grill**

26 Green St.

Newburyport, Mass.

(978) 463-9009

[www.missionoakgrill.com](http://www.missionoakgrill.com) (site not live at this writing)

[www.opentable.com](http://www.opentable.com) to reserve online.

Hours: Monday - Thursday: 5 p.m. - 10 p.m., Friday & Saturday: 5 p.m. - 11 p.m., Sunday: Brunch 11 a.m. - 2:30 p.m. Dinner 5 p.m. - 9 p.m.

### **Food** ★★★★★

Not your average steakhouse, the menu here offers inventive twists on classic dishes, created to delight and satisfy.

**Service** ★★★★★ The overall professionalism here is obvious despite the few hiccups in service we experienced. I'm giving them some slack.

### **Ambience** ★★★★★

Lively, classy atmosphere with lovely décor.

### **Overall** ★★★★★

This newcomer is this year's cool water in the desert with delicious cuisine, affable staff and wonderful vibe.