

Thursday, December 11, 2014

Clintons impresses from start to finish

By Ann Connery Frantz Telegram & Gazette Reviewer

An upscale restaurant along High Street, in the Clinton downtown area, has brought a touch of urban Boston style to the city. Clintons Bar & Grille opened in September, and the weekend crowds testify to its popularity. There's nary a table empty at peak time, and it's easy to see that the crowd is happy.

You'll find the Bar & Grille just a few steps up from the Museum of Russian Icons, which is at the end of High Street. It's located in the former Via Alto Italian restaurant building. The restaurant has undergone a complete update and decor change, giving it a tony look with industrial-edge lighting fixtures and plenty of wood to set it off. We love the brightly lit bar area, which has colors that can be changed according to mood or whim. There are several tables by the bar and in front, as well as the main dining room, where a line of busmen and servers stand ready to assist customers — impressive staffing. An upstairs mezzanine seats groups of 50 at small banquet tables; the room has its own bar.

Executive Chef Ilias Kakouris, who has worked on the North Shore, has created a varied cuisine, ranging from grilled fish and beef to pasta and pizza. The menu offers excellent salads, well-priced lunches and dinner entrees from \$15 to \$29.

This wasn't our first visit; we dined in the bar area earlier in the fall, enjoying its convivial atmosphere and a colorful array of backlit glass bottles; the lights give the area a frosting reminiscent of the "Frozen" movie, which is actually very relaxing. Fortunately, the music is light jazz, not "Let It Go." This is all grown-up, and lots of fun.

This time, our party of four was promptly seated at a booth. Suffering from back pain due to travel, I quickly ordered a drink from our server, Stefanie. She later proved to be well-informed about the offerings that evening, helping with both appetizer and entrée decisions.

There's an ample wine menu, with many reds and whites available by the glass as well.

In addition to soups and a nice selection of salads, there are several appetizers, including truffled pan-seared scallops (\$12), butternut squash raviolis (\$9) and lobster macaroni and cheese (\$13). We ordered calamari, lightly fried in batter (\$9), and served with marinara-feta sauce. We also selected New Zealand mussels on the half shell with a broth of tomato, basil, white wine and garlic (\$9). The mussels were larger and more firm than many. A serving is large enough for two or three to share, as was true of the calamari. The latter's texture was refreshing; I've grown to distrust calamari because so many restaurants serve the rubber-hose version. Not so here. These were tender and exceptionally well seasoned — flavorful and lightly breaded. Both appetizers were prepared with confidence and skill.

This all arrived with freshly made bread and a delicious cheese-oil blend for dipping. It was difficult not to overindulge in the bread, which tasted so wonderful. We tried the lobster bisque (\$9) and New England clam chowder (\$7), which Stefanie claimed had more clams than the ocean. We couldn't vouch for that, but it was scrumptious. The bisque was as well; three ounces of tender, buttery lobster floated in the cup. I highly recommend either: they're well prepared and memorable.

The four of us were wise to go lightly on appetizers, as the dinners we ordered were generously sized and very tasty.

A friend's Caesar salad (\$7) was large and she was enthusiastically in favor of the choice. From her reaction, I'd say it's on a future list for me. Her companion chose filet mignon (\$29), an attractive presentation of filet over horseradish-flavored mashed potatoes and portobello mushrooms in a red wine reduction. I tried the filet, and it was tenderly sweet and delicious. He enjoyed it all, and I added once again to my futures list.

For this evening, I selected braised short ribs, served boneless and surrounded by a pool of orzo (\$22). The meat was rich and tender, but the orzo didn't really strike my fancy, as it gave the entire dish a soupy, stewy consistency that took away from both its appearance and the short ribs' flavor. The overall sauce blend was too rich for me.

My companion's choice, chicken marsala (\$20) met with approval. The slightly sweet taste of the marsala, in a portobello mushroom cream sauce, gave the tender chicken a gentle flavor boost. He enjoyed it and shared a sample. I agreed that the chicken tasted great. Penne pasta with the dish was a good choice, absorbing the creamy sauce nicely.

We shared desserts: a warm apple crumble (\$7) and two falling chocolate cakes (\$9 each). The apple crumble has the distinctive taste of fresh-baked apples and for apple dessert lovers it's a must. The "falling" chocolate cake — referring to its method of preparation (it takes several minutes to prepare) — is equally enjoyable, being moist, rich and topped with ice cream. If you're full from dinner, order one to share.

Tables were filled and the room added conversational talk and laughter as we continued our meal, but we were able to hear each other well and enjoyed the friendly, busy atmosphere. It's akin to restaurants I've visited in Boston, and stands in a position to attract more and more diners as time goes on. A function in the upstairs mezzanine did not distract from the main floor dining area, despite its open design. There's a nice combination of service, ambiance and quality meals at Clintons Bar and Grille, and it's clearly a must for area diners.

Our meal for four came to \$185 with tax, exclusive of tip.

Clintons Bar & Grille



27 High St., Clinton

Phone: (978) 598-7002

Web: www.clintonsbargrille.com

Hours: 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday-Thursday; 11:30 am. to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday

Parking and access: Accessible from front and small rear lot. Parking can be dicey, given the proximity to a popular second-run movie theater. Try on the street or parking lots below High Street

Credit cards: Major cards accepted

Prices: Moderate to higher

Pluses: Upscale atmosphere, good food, friendly service

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