



PHOTOS BY APRIL L. DOWD/TIMES UNION

THE CASTLE STREET CAFE is just off the main drag in cozy Great Barrington, Mass.

Castle Street Cafe: a New England treat

By WILLIAM M. DOWD
Associate Editor

GREAT BARRINGTON, Mass. — There may be more "typical New England" towns tucked away in the Berkshires than in any other part of the multistate region. This is one of them.

Actual sidewalks, actual stores not embraced by a mall, actual pedestrians stopping to chat, spired churches, an imposing old town hall — and a gem of a restaurant that should be required by law in every town.

We speak here of the Castle Street Cafe, located on a short dead-end block off the main drag, right next to the fire department and across the street from the municipal building.

Proprietor-chef Michael Ballon has created a spot that is at once a gathering place for town folk of all ages and a serious restaurant with a wine list that has earned *Wine Spectator* magazine's coveted "Award of Excellence."

In what once was a pair of commercial spaces, Ballon has a sirable yet cozy operation: a bar and tables on one side, a dining room on the other. A variety of handmade glass casings cover hanging lights. Dark wood is set off by gold-stippled walls and accented by large floor plates.

The menu is an eclectic one, dotted with New England products. And there are clever gimmicks as well. For example, "Casablanca" was playing next door at the old Mahaiwe theater that weekend, so Ballon was offering a three-course "Mo-

roccan" dinner and a movie ticket for a set price.

Over an icy Bombay Sapphire martini and a glass of local hard cider (gentle apple aroma, full-bodied flavor), we made our decisions.

Companion began with the ginger carrot soup, an unusual yet pleasing concoction. The ginger was evident, but a smooth carrot broth was the dominant feature. "It gets better the more of it I eat," Companion said. "You have to like carrots to enjoy it, but if you're like me and you do, you're in luck."

My starter was a heavenly plate of smoked Scottish salmon from Kilchurn Estate. An ample layering of sliced salmon on a bed of julienned leeks with a bit of vinaigrette was decorated with sour cream and capers. I could easily have made a meal of such succulent stuff.

Our entrees were accompanied by a pair of wines from the by-the-glass list: a California Rosso from movie director Francis Coppola's well-regarded winery, and a '98 Chianti classico import from Gabbiano. Both more than held their own against a variety of food flavors, complementing without battling them.

Companion's entree was a roasted salmon with roasted vegetables: the fish sweet, moist and flaking, the vegetables diced into a hash style and roasted in a balsamic reduction. Mine was veal medallions with wild mushrooms — no cheap button mushroom slices here — that added a woody touch along with the light saucing, accompanied by steamed vegeta-

DINNER DATE

CASTLE STREET CAFE
10 Castle St.
Great Barrington, Mass., 01230

- Telephone: (413) 528-5244.
- Hours: Sunday-Thursday, 5 to 9 p.m.; Friday-Saturday, 5 to 10 p.m.; Closed Tuesday.
- Credit Cards: All major plastic.
- Parking/Access: On-street parking; nearby municipal lot. Interior access good.
- Smoking: None.
- Food (●●●): Modern fusion cuisine. Full bar and excellent wine list.
- Service (●●●): Friendly, efficient.
- Atmosphere (●●●): Charming New England cafe.
- Dinner Prices: \$ \$

Rating Key: one to four stars, with two stars an average score. Price rating based on rough average of entree costs: \$ \$ for \$9.95 and under; \$ \$ for \$10.00-\$15.95; \$ \$ \$ for \$15.95 and up.

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Companion and I went down opposite paths for dessert.

Her selection was a pair of profiteroles — cream-puff-like pastries — sliced in half to hold small scoops of locally made vanilla ice cream and a drizzle of chocolate sauce.

Mine was an excellent cheese plate: sliced apple and crispy, seeded crackers flanking a selection that included *roggi-ano* Parmesano, a Berkshire bleu from High Lawn Farms, an aged cheddar from Grafton Village and a local chevre. Such a nice change from sweet desserts.

Our bill — before tax and tip — was \$67.50, plus \$23 for the beverages.

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