

CASTLE STREET CAFE

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The highest praise that can be offered for the Castle Street Cafe in Great Barrington, Mass., and perhaps for any restaurant, is that it gracefully allows guests to fulfill their varying fantasies of what it means to dine out stylishly and well. Oysters and mussels and French white wine as a backdrop to boisterous conversation at the bar? No problem. A formal, elegant dinner for four? Right this way.

Castle Street's chef proprietor, Michael Ballou, oversees one of those rare establishments that are ambidextrous: It excels at serving burgers and beer, including an excellent locally brewed India pale ale, or meticulously prepared entrees such as breast of duck with potato galette and apple-and-pear compote. What cinches the deal is that the wide range of cuisine is, to a dish, delicious and the staff is charming and agile.

That impressive range was forged many years ago, when the cafe across from the town hall was considerably smaller, contained in a single storefront with the massive, carved wooden bar in the rear. Since taking over an adjoining space and dividing itself into two discrete arenas, the formal dining room and the funky Celestial Bar, Castle Street has only gotten better.

Guests enter through the celestial realm, which includes a sunny section near the front windows, and must then make a choice. For many, the elegance of Castle Street's appetizers and main courses demands the tastefully decorated dining room through an open doorway to the right, but for others the bar is the place to be, no matter the cuisine. And on summer evenings, lingering light that appears diffuse, as if seen through lace, lures still others to choose the nook near the windows.

Colorful blown-glass chandeliers hang over the cool dark wood of the actual bar, which holds

bowls and urns heaped with mixed nuts, vintage photographs of jazz artists adorn the walls, and the small tables in the rest of the space are moveable for feasts, in the best bistro tradition. High style and energy are palpable and, with candlelight emanating from the bar and from each table, the attractive staff members following a ceaseless choreography create an effect that feels like an Impressionist painting in motion.

Against that canvas, the food provides the final masterful brushstrokes, along with the deep and impressive wine list, which offers a dozen or so reds and whites by the glass, while containing bottles to drink and others to dream about, notably Bordeaux from the legendary 1982 vintage. A glass is \$5 to \$7, and the prices for bottles, and for everything else at Castle Street, are quite reasonable.

The menu changes to some degree every month, and each guest in the Celestial Bar receives both the bar menu and the more extensive listing given to those choosing the dining room. Among the appetizers listed on both menus are steamed mussels with tomato, garlic and white wine, Maryland crab cakes with a lemon and dill sauce, and eggplant Napoleon with goat cheese and tomato sauce. An olive sampler with focaccia continues the cross-pollination, along with Shiitake mushrooms with garlic and herbs. A goat-cheese sampler is included on the bar menu, while fried shrimp dumplings join the appetizers on the dining-room menu. Malpeque oysters were available in July-four for \$8 in the dining room and, more casually, \$2 each for any number in the bar. Appetizers otherwise range in price from \$5, for a chilled cantaloupe soup, or split pea, to \$8 for the mussels.

Moving toward heartier fare, the bar menu includes a Caesar salad or grilled chicken salad, the

"biggest and best burger in town" and Scottish smoked salmon-\$9 each-along with a black-bean-and-shrimp burrito or a grilled, open-face steak sandwich, at \$10 each, and a Castle Street pizza for \$11.

The pizza is on the dining-room menu, which amplifies that it features fresh mozzarella and roasted red and yellow peppers, and a few pasta dishes are available, in the \$13-to-\$15 range, including fettuccini with chicken, broccoli and red peppers with a pesto sauce, and linguini Provencale.

Among the main courses, the first three or four listed represent the specials for the month and the remainder make up the core favorites. In May, for example, sea scallops were served with soba noodles and Oriental vegetables in a Thai broth, while in July the scallops were sauteed with ginger and coconut milk and served with summer vegetables. Striped bass with Vermont chanterelles and North Dakota organic bison ribs were the other July specials.

Mainstays include fillet of salmon with a mango sauce, sauteed shrimp with sugar snap peas and garlic sauce, the duck with the potato galette, and a grilled breast of chicken with baby spinach, ginger vinaigrette and roasted barley salad. There are also grilled Cornish hen, sauteed medallions of veal with a wild mushroom sauce and a potato cake, filet mignon with roasted shallots in a port wine sauce and steak au poivre with straw potatoes. Calf's live is available, as is a grilled vegetable plate. Entrees range from \$16 to \$22.

On a recent Saturday evening, when devoted locals began streaming in as soon as Castle Street opened at 5 o'clock, the staff was put to the test by a group of four in middle reaches of the bar.

Each guest, as it happened, focused on a different style of dining-one opted to make a meal of crab cakes and mussels, another decided on the bar menu's grilled chicken sandwich, the third went with an entree that punctuates the bar menu but doesn't quite make the dining-room list, meatloaf with mashed potatoes, and the last ordered rack of lamb with garlic and fresh rosemary, served with mashed potatoes and summer vegetables.

Our waitress wisely knew to ask if the salad that comes with the rack of lamb should be served immediately so that all of the plates would arrive together. Even better, though we dallied a bit in deciding, she kept a close watch to make sure our order was taken before that of a much larger group that arrived shortly after we did. Beverages and Castle Street's excellent bread arrived without any delay and the meal proceeded delightfully-as seems always to be the case here.

Having those guests was a bonus, as I got a glimpse, for the first time, of Castle Street's desserts. The list is tantalizingly long, extending from a cannellized banana tart with banana ice cream to profiteroles with vanilla ice cream and chocolate sauce, with 10 other choices in between, including bread pudding, blueberry cobbler, warm apple crisp, a sorbet sampler and a frozen lemon souffle with raspberry sauce. Judging by the rave reviews for the creme brulee and the chocolate mousse cake, dubbed "world's best" by Newsday, any choice would be a good one. Desserts are \$6 each, and port and dessert wines are available, along with coffee or tea, espresso or cappuccino.

Castle Street Cafe is closed Tues. and otherwise serves dinner only, from 5 to 9:30 p.m. Sun. through Thurs., and to 10:30 p.m. on Fri. and Saturday. The telephone number is (413) 528-5244.