

# The Star-Ledger

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By Cody Kendall

There's more than one Matt involved with Matt's Red Rooster Grill. Culinary Institute of America roommates Matt McPherson and Matt Green teamed up to open this delightful restaurant last fall, adding instant flair to Flemington's dining scene.

McPherson, whose previous gigs included Hamilton's Grill Room in Lambertville and the Sea Grill in Manhattan tends to work the front of the house. His partner, who ran Napa 29 in California and was also employed by the Four Seasons in Boston, spends more time in front of the wood-burning grill that dominates the downstairs dining room. The grill is at the heart of what the restaurant does best, making fine meat and seafood even more flavorful.

The establishment is located in an artfully converted two-family house with a welcoming, wide front porch.

"We always had a dream of opening a place together," said McPherson. Although both men are young (McPherson is 28 and Green is 30), they shared a clear-cut vision of what they wanted to achieve.

"Our message is that we are trying to do upscale food without the fuss of having to come in a suit and tie. It's a very casual place with a high-end menu. The big thing here is comfort," said McPherson.

That means you can wear a T-shirt and shorts if so inclined; it doesn't mean the restaurant is serving comfort food. No, the offerings have the kind of panache you would never have found at Grandma's table. While the sophistication level is high, everything flows together without the use of eccentric ingredients or combinations that put a strain on the palate.

Very often, there is just one key element to brighten up a dish. A green apple Pinot Noir reduction adds a fruity sparkle to cedar plank salmon (\$22) and peach jus does the same for a house-smoked double-cut pork chop (\$23), while sweet corn salsa amplifies the appeal of the Griggstown Farm rotisserie chicken (\$20).

There are more multifaceted offerings, too, though none ever gets so complicated that the main ingredient is shouted down. Grilled scallops (\$12) are great on their own, but even better in an appetizer that also includes avocado, tomato, capers and brown butter to provide more dimensions to the succulence of the seafood, which still comes shining through. Rack of lamb (\$33) is jazzed up with 10 spices, ranging from cumin and coriander to fennel and allspice, giving this tender meat a whole new taste. It's actually a bit of an adventure, with an aroma that has an impact equal to its flavor. Yellow squash, zucchini and red pepper add a streak of color, and the mashed potatoes are wonderful.

Sun-dried tomato tapenade balances the pesto-glazed Hawaiian butter fish (\$25), adding a touch of excitement to the smoothness of the sea. A New York strip steak (\$22 single-cut, \$44 double-cut) exemplifies the power of the grill. The cut is wonderful, but the expert grilling technique is what puts it in the "memorable" category. Béarnaise sauce serves as a mere flourish. Summery soups (\$6.50) hit the mark, with a lightness appropriate for the season that doesn't diminish their depth. The corn chowder is sweet, the cream of wild mushroom earthy and the gazpacho with shrimp and scallop ceviche both refreshing and nourishing. Take the option of having smaller portions of all three for \$7.50. You won't regret it.

Salads (\$7) are worthwhile at Matt's, especially the grilled Romaine, which spent just enough time on the fire to have a slightly smoky flavor. A creamy Parmesan dressing finishes this off with a cool touch. Candied pecans and honey juxtaposed with a roasted shallot vinaigrette make the house salad special.

Though portions are large, no dish is bigger than the mammoth cioppino (\$25), with mussels, clams, calamari, shrimp and other ocean denizens jostling each other in a just-spicy-enough tomato lobster broth atop pasta.

Desserts (\$7) did not impress us as being at the same level as the rest of the meal. They felt a bit heavy after all we had eaten. An apple-caramel cheesecake had a bit of a lilt, but I would have liked to see more creative and less-weighty choices than a peanut butter torte or a brownie. Although the restaurant does not have a liquor license, if you forget to bring a bottle of wine, management can offer you choices from Hunterdon County's Unionville Winery under a New Jersey wine license arrangement.

Servers are bright and pleasant, with a "can-do" attitude that demonstrates good training for the most part. At one point in the evening, however, things got a little ahead of the staff and we had to ask for flatware to replace what was taken away with the plates for the previous course.

The restaurant is a hot ticket, which, as too often is the case, also means that it can be noisy. During peak hours on a busy weekend night, this isn't the spot for quiet conversation. But Matt's Red Rooster is fun, with a young, fresh feel, and its lively food is definitely worth repeat visits.