



This Flemington newcomer is fulfilling its high ambitions with attention to detail in a lovingly refurbished building.

Food: Very good

Service: Very good, attentive, polished

Prices: Moderate+

Cuisine: Straightforward; chop house meets bistro

Vegetarian Options: Three appetizers, four soups and salads, but no entrées.

Ambience: Cosmopolitan

Every now and then, you enter a restaurant and know at once that you're going to have a fine meal and a good time. Perhaps it's a genuine welcome, or the happy buzz of diners, or the clink of glasses and aromas from an open kitchen, or a well-designed dining area with pleasant appointments and well-dressed wait staff. At this new place-to-be in Flemington, there's no need to decide which of these features does the trick; Matt's Red Rooster Grill has them all.

The Grill opened last November in a lovingly refurbished house that is identified over the door by its stylish logo: a crowing cock sporting a chef's hat. But even if you're looking down at the sidewalk, you'll know when you've arrived: a fork and knife are cemented into the pavement at the entrance. That small touch evidences the attention to detail that creates fine food and a hospitable atmosphere that makes for a memorable evening.

The ground-floor dining area was full when we arrived, and we were offered a table upstairs. The first-floor atmosphere was so engaging, though, that we waited, admiring the cosmopolitan décor, including the walls, each painted a different, natural tone. Soon we were seated at a table with a banquette, facing a large mirror that seemed to double the size of the room. From our table, we had a good view of the open kitchen dominated by a large wood-fired grill where chefs in crisp white jackets perform their culinary ballet.

Our reservation was for 8:30, by which time only three specials remained available. But the concise menu offered enough tempting options that we were not disappointed. It includes 14 appetizers, soups and salads (\$6.50-\$12) and eight entrées (\$18-\$32).

The menu offers three soups (\$6.50); roasted carrot-ginger with sweet apple compote, tomato-based seafood chowder and wild mushroom with port chive cream. We chose a sampler of all three (\$7.50), served in small ramekins arrayed on a ceramic artist's palette. All were excellent: the intense, rich mushroom bisque, the mild chowder packed with seafood chunks, and the gentle, creamy carrot.

Comparable to a spicy tuna roll, the tower of tuna with wasabi cream (\$12) is among the Grill's most popular appetizers. We found that the subtle raw-tuna flavor and delicate texture were overpowered by the gooey wasabi cream and mayonnaise mixture. This appetizer is accompanied by fried wontons, encrusted with white and black sesame seeds, and a dish of sweetened soy sauce, which provided much appreciated contrasts in taste and texture.

We had to satisfy our curiosity about the grilled romaine with creamy Parmesan dressing (\$12). Warm and infused with the smoky flavor of the wood fire, a small head of Romaine was dressed with a smooth, Caesar dressing. Crab cakes (\$12) were a special appetizer. The shredded crab was formed into cakes a bit larger than ping-pong balls, sautéed till crisp and served in remoulade sauce. On the side was an excellent coleslaw in which, Chef Matt McPherson revealed, the secret ingredient is chunks of tart Granny Smith apples.

Baked spinach and artichoke dip turns up on many menus, but the Red Rooster version (\$8) stands out. Distinguished in part by its array of toasted, garlic-dusted baguette crostini, this hearty appetizer offers large chunks of artichokes topped with broiled gruyère.

Grilled whole branzino (sea bass) was tender, served with rich, zesty lemon caper butter (\$26), but proved a challenge because of its many, tiny bones. Chef McPherson later told us that he believes the farm-raised fish's delicate flavor justifies the diner's labor. We're not sure we agree, and have since learned the fish can be ordered filleted, which would make for greater enjoyment. Griggstown Farm rotisserie chicken was a breast and leg with roasted garlic emulsion (\$18). Cooked over the restaurant's imposing wood-fired grill, it literally was done to a turn — juicy and with the intense flavor for which the Griggstown Farm chickens are noted. Entrées were served with puréed squash, shredded carrots and al dente green beans. In addition to these accompaniments, the branzino came with pearl couscous dotted with raisins.

Like the rest of the menu, the desserts (made on the premises) often change to take advantage of fresh ingredients. Signature offerings are the house cheesecake and peanut butter mousse cake. We selected the chocolate banana cake and the almond raspberry torte (both \$7), both accompanied by a chunk of fresh pineapple. The cake lacked the core of intense fruit flavor we expected, but the icing and chocolate would satisfy the most demanding chocoholic. The crunch of the almonds, partnered with dense raspberry filling, produced a delightful torte.

Matt McPherson grew up in Lambertville and has deep roots in Hunterdon County. The renovation of the building last year revealed his great-grandfather's name on the electric junction box that had been installed in 1906. A graduate of the Culinary Institute of America with experience at fine restaurants, including Hamilton's Grill, he, his wife Erin, and his partner-at-the-grill Matt Green have high ambitions for their new establishment. And they are achieving them. As spring advances, outdoor dining will be available. Lunch service begins this month. We recommend a trip to Flemington while you can still get a reservation.

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