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If ever a town needed an infusion of culinary excitement, it is Flemington. And it got just that when Matt's Red Rooster Grill opened right before Thanksgiving last fall. The young chefs and co-owners, Matt McPherson and Matt Green, had been roommates at the Culinary Institute of America and went on to establish a restaurant in Arizona. After heading off in different directions, McPherson eventually became sous chef at Hamilton's Grill Room in Lambertville. Now, the two Matts, professionally reunited, take turns in the kitchen and the front of the house at their eponymous restaurant. Both bring prodigious skills to bear.

As one dining companion noted, the "Red Rooster" part of the name suggests a diner, but McPherson says it is meant to connote both American fare and a relaxed, casual setting. There is nothing old-fashioned, though, about either this b.y.o.'s modern American fare or its urbane décor. Matt's is housed on two floors of a pretty Victorian home on Bloomfield Avenue, catty-corner to Flemington Furs.

Including outdoor seating on the porch and patio, it seats about 100. The interior sensibility is contemporary sophistication, yet executed with warmth and respect for the bones of the space. The walls are painted a friendly, enveloping gray - a handy trick, that - with sleek stainless-steel pendant lamps and colorful contemporary art on the walls. Even the restrooms are attractive. The kitchen, a long open grill with four seats at the short end, is open to the dining room. Even though my table of four sat at the nearest table, we suffered neither heat nor smells during our dinner. We went on a Friday night and the place was almost full up, including the small private dining room at the back of the top floor.

McPherson tags his restaurant an "American chophouse," and there is plenty on the menu that bears this out. Three of the ten entrees feature steak: a New York strip with Béarnaise, rib eye with cabernet butter, and center-cut filet with bacon-blue cheese sauce. In addition, most evenings see yet another beefy special, such as porterhouse with horseradish sauce. Add in grilled ahi tuna steak, cedar plank salmon, and rotisserie chicken, and it's not hard to see where the restaurant's heart lies. There is even a classic steakhouse salad on the menu. Called "The Wedge," this retro dish comprises iceberg lettuce with blue cheese, bacon, and tomato. It costs \$7, as do two other salads.

But the fare at Matt's Red Rooster offers more finesse and interest than either the barnyard association or chophouse designation implies. I chose the sweet corn chowder to start. I like corn chowder in general, but I don't expect too much from it. Matt's version offered not only corny creaminess, but a wonderful interplay of sweet and smoke that made it more complex and totally satisfying. At \$6.50, the soups, which also include cream of wild mushroom and gazpacho with shrimp and scallop ceviche, are the least expensive options on the menu.

Another starter, tower of tuna tartare with wasabi cream (\$12), is a tour de force of restraint: my companion who ordered it isn't a fan of wasabi, so appreciated that there is just enough of the fiery condiment to enhance without overpowering the delicate fish. Pan-seared soft shell crab (\$12) was rated excellent by another of my companions, even without its mantle of delicious caper butter. But a langoustine special received a mixed reaction. A lone langoustine – not very large nor meaty – did not manage to distinguish itself, although its partners on the plate did.

These included a tomatillo sauce (“nicely tart without being puckering,” my companion said) and a corn soufflé/pudding that made for a creamy and fitting complement.

Entrees are characterized by quality ingredients, expert handling, and creative pairings. My choice of Hawaiian butter fish (\$25) could have been bland, despite a thin glazing of pesto, but came alive with a topping of sun-dried tomato tapenade, and included a flavorful mound of Israeli couscous. The “Butcher’s Choice” 14-ounce rib eye (\$25) has more conventional accompaniments, but is outstanding nonetheless. Cabernet butter gilds the lily magnificently, and the creamy mashed potatoes have only a hint of garlic, rather than a fistful. Entrees come with the vegetable medley of the day, which this night included nicely sautéed green beans, zucchini, and sweet red peppers. Since the two Matts choose whatever looks best from local farms, the veggies change nightly.

The Red Rooster cioppino (\$25) made me a true believer in a dish that often induces ennui. It is chock full of all the right fish and seafood sitting atop perfectly al dente linguine, but its base of luxurious lobster broth is what sets it apart from the rest. It also doesn't hurt that the clams, mussels, lobsters, shrimp and/or scallops, and assorted finfish are sautéed at the last moment – as the salads are being cleared from the table, according to McPherson.

Such fastidiousness is also apparent in the double-cut, house-smoked pork chop (\$23), which is becoming something of a house signature. Preparation takes several days, encompassing brining, air drying, and cold smoking before being cooked to order. Currently its porcine goodness is enhanced with peach jus, but the sauce varies with the seasons. McPherson estimates that he changes the menu significantly every two months.

The young fellow who served us could not have been more pleasant or enthusiastic, and was clearly conversant with the nuances of the food. He rightly offered to open at the start of the meal both bottles of wine we had brought, but then stumbled a bit by assuming out loud that the ladies would likely drink the white and the gents the red. Since our visit, by the way, this b.y.o. has begun to offer Unionville Wines.

Most desserts are made in house, and these are the ones that shine. So ignore the so-so chocolate layer cake and chocolate mud-pie thing. On the other hand, do not miss Matt's peanut butter torte. Normally, I disdain desserts with peanut butter, but this is one even adults can enjoy. Inside the graham cracker crust, the peanut butter and chocolate filling is neither cloying nor heavy, and is helped along by caramel sauce and a layer of hard chocolate. The lemon cream tartlet topped with fresh fruit is another winner, and even the Ciao Bella sorbets come in interesting flavors, such as pomegranate and grapefruit-Campari. All desserts are \$7.

Matt's Red Rooster Grill has many reasons to crow: a menu that is easy to love, experienced hands at the grill, personable staff, and a setting that manages to be thoroughly modern yet warm and relaxing. Flemington – and all of us - can ask for little more.

Food: Very good

Service: Friendly, knowledgeable

Cuisine: Modern American chophouse

Prices: High end of moderate

Ambiance: Victorian exterior; stylishly modern interior

Pat Tanner is a food and travel writer, restaurant reviewer, and radio talk show host based in Princeton, New Jersey. She has written for newspapers and magazines including The New York Times NJ Section, The Star-Ledger, The Times (Trenton), and New Jersey Monthly. She is vice president of the Central New Jersey Chapter of Slow Food, and is a member of the International Association of Culinary Professionals (IACP), the James Beard Foundation, and the New York Association of Culinary Professionals (NYACP).ent Business - Princeton and Central New Jersey 2006