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Gibbet Hill Grill does everything just right

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By Bill Cory

If I didn't recall seeing cows living in this Groton barn only a few years back, I'd have to assume that the building is a beautiful reproduction. They had raised black angus cattle here for as long as I can remember. The new **Gibbet Hill Grill** preserved the farm, which was about to be cut into housing lots. It remains a working farm, with black angus beef cattle roaming about, but they have plenty of acreage all to themselves. And don't be concerned that you're parking near tomorrow's entree on the hoof; the farm now raises only breeding stock.

The two rehabilitated barns are attractive as can be. Boards from a New Hampshire barn are the new interior siding. The first barn you'll encounter is used for weddings and other special occasions. The second was our destination for dinner on a cold, dark, dreary - and rainy - December night. Greeting us was a roaring fireplace actually burning real wood. The blaze separates the entry and bar from a comfortable, high-ceilinged, bi-level dining room with beams, planks, steel rods and angle irons everywhere. Some of the decor is seasonal, like the 6-foot gingerbread house on the mantel; other accents are old pulleys, tools and farm antiques, up to and including a nifty barn door, if you can find it. We took no chances on a vitamin C deficiency in the cold and flu season; the Soup Goddess began with a tequila sunrise, I with a Margarita. Priced at \$4.50 and \$8 respectively, they provided

ample strength to intercept any bug on the prowl and fine flavor to necessitate a refill for the non-driver.

From eight appetizers, two soups and six salads, we chose a hot crock of local cheeses with crabmeat for \$8.50. The crabmeat was real, the cheeses buttery and the overall effect delicate and delicious.

Mushrooms, at \$6.50, were another good choice. About a half-dozen caps, served in a small, nearly dry iron skillet, were stuffed with cornbread, herbs, garlic and Parmesan cheese and they were a delight. Drier than the typical stuffed fungi, the mushrooms and the herbs were in good balance, with the garlic and Parmesan playing minor roles. After a little fresh artisan bread and as much perfect cornbread as we dared, we were ready for the main course.

Eight steaks and prime rib anchor the entree selections, with prices from \$16 for sirloin tips to \$36 for a large filet mignon. "Farm specials" made sense as a category for chicken pot pie, a cider-glazed pork chop or shepherd's pie, but the inclusion of lobster fricassee and crispy potato-topped haddock threw me. Not on any farm I've seen (and I grew up in farm country). There was lots more variety in entrees, though: rack of lamb, raspberry chicken, meatloaf, parmesan-chicken penne pasta and a wonderful dish I've learned to seek out: butternut squash ravioli. Salmon, shrimp, scallops and haddock finish the menu neatly; lots of good options.

The Soup Goddess ordered shepherd's pie, \$15, most likely to see how it stood up against her own version. It did very well, with plenty of pulled beef and lamb in a mildly barbecue-accented gravy with veggies plus whipped potatoes with a restrained touch of garlic. I couldn't resist crab-topped grilled salmon with Hollandaise for \$18.50. There was no room for improvement in the perfectly grilled salmon or the well-matched Hollandaise. A delightful entree with excellent glazed carrots and even better butternut squash with maple syrup and brown sugar whipped in.

A "for the table" menu feature offers onion rings, sauteed wild mushrooms, three-cheese mac & cheese and asparagus gratin, for \$5.50 to \$7. We chose the asparagus, baked with wild mushrooms and Vermont cheddar, served in one of those little iron skillets again. It was an excellent addition to the meal, and at \$7, well worth considering.

We were happy campers by now, but unselfishly willing to tackle a dessert or two for a chance to better inform you. Creme brulee, \$6, with maple syrup and cranberry is a health food, after all. Well, it ought to be. It was delicious, of course, with perfectly smooth texture and

understated maple and cranberry. We then threw all caution to the wind and tried hot chocolate cheesecake with Gran Marnier whipped cream and a scoop of Ben & Jerry's chocolate ice cream. Nothing understated about it; a satisfying, seriously indulgent dessert for \$6.50. It would be hard to improve on our dinner, the service, or the setting.

Torri Rodgers, our server, was cheerful, pleasant and efficient even though we opted to dine off the beaten path, smack in front of that big fireplace near the entry.

Our ample dinner for two, including appetizers, the asparagus plate and desserts, came to \$68, plus beverages, tax and gratuity; an outstanding value. Take the ride to Groton sometime soon. To be on the safe side, call for reservations first, and try to arrive while it's still light out so that you can enjoy the views of (and from) the farm.

Gibbet Hill Grill

61 Lowell Road, Route 40, Groton

Web: www.gibbethill.com

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Hours: 4 to 9 p.m. Sundays and Mondays, 4 to 10 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays

Phone: (978) 448-2900

Parking: Private lots

Handicapped access: Good

Credit Cards: Visa, MasterCard, American Express

Prices: Moderate to high; entrees \$13 to \$36

Pluses: Delightful surroundings, good menu variety and superb results from the kitchen

Minuses: None. Not one. Not even a little one.

About the Stars

Perfection: * * * *

Very Good: * * *

Good: * *

Below Par: *

Serious Flaws: No stars

Etc. restaurant reviews are the opinions of reviewers based upon at least one visit to the restaurant. The reviewer is accompanied by at least one companion. Recommendations from readers about restaurants they would like to have reviewed are welcome.

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