

DINING OUT

Heavenly food in an earthy setting

BY KATHERINE IMBRIE
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

It would be hard to think of a more inviting atmosphere for a winter dinner out than Mill's Tavern. Though the restaurant has been open for six years, it still looks and feels as sensational as it did in March 2002, when it was the latest creation of one of Providence's star chefs and restaurateurs, Jaime D'Oliveira. Best of all, the quality of both the food and the standard of service match the restaurant's look of earthy sophistication.

D'Oliveira — who has had a hand in dozens of Rhode Island restaurants over the past three decades — continues to own Mill's, his vision of an American seasonal restaurant featuring wood-fired cooking. In the years since opening Mill's, he's gone on to open other restaurants, notably Wayland Square's Red Stripe — soon to have a twin in Narragansett Pier. Red Stripe has a more casual vibe than Mill's, but the two share a French-leaning sensibility. Over the years, several chefs have taken D'Oliveira's concept for Mill's and given it a spin of their own, always successfully.

For the past year and a half, it has been Christian Pieper, 27 and a graduate of the New England Culinary Institute in Burlington, Vt., who has overseen the kitchen, joining a tight staff of cooks and servers, many of whom have been at Mill's since it opened. "I'm the puppy of the group," he says, indicating that the staff is supportive and works as a fluid team. Before coming to Mill's, Pieper cooked in Providence at Neath's (the former restaurant of Neath Pal, whom Pieper calls a mentor), and at Boston's Top of the Hub.

For a diner, the calm professionalism of both the waitstaff and the cooks (who are on view in the open-hearth kitchen) is one of the many pleasures of dining at Mill's. Another is the look of the place: The dining area, which is divided into bar, main room, and a smaller annex to seat a total of 130, is large but feels intimate. Designed by D'Oliveira's wife, Kim Nathanson D'Oliveira, to reflect an Arts and Crafts

DETAILS, DETAILS

Mill's Tavern, 101 North Main St., Providence.

(401) 272-3331,

www.millstavernrestaurant.com. Upscale casual.

Reservations accepted.

Complimentary valet or on-street parking.

Wheelchair accessible.

Booster seats available. AE, DC, DIS, MC, V. Dinner

nightly: 5-10 p.m.

Mon.-Thurs., to 11 p.m. Fri.

and Sat., and Sun. 4-9 p.m.

Appetizers \$9 to \$14; entrees

\$18 to \$40; desserts \$8.

Extensive wine list, about

300 bottles, most from \$29 to

\$130. By-the-glass wines \$8

to \$9.25. Three-course prix

fixe menu Sun.-Thurs.,

\$29.95.

BILL OF FARE

Dinner for two at Mill's Tavern

might look like this:

Pan-seared sea scallops.....\$14.00

Braised littlenecks.....\$12.00

Rack of lamb.....\$34.00

Striped bass.....\$27.00

Glass Abbeyville Chardonnay \$8.50

Glass McWilliams Shiraz.....\$8.50

Crème brulee.....\$8.00

Raspberry mousse.....\$8.00

Total food and drink.....\$120.00

Tax (state and city).....\$9.60

Tip.....\$24.00

Total bill.....\$153.60

aesthetic, the interior of the former Pilgrim mill building is warmed by burnished wood, layered stone and the bright flames of the open hearth at the back of the dining area. Bull's-eye glass panes in the entrance door and bubbly glass hurricane-lamp chandeliers add sparkle, and an oyster-shell mosaic bar and hand-crafted tile mural add artistic interest.

Background music is subtle, and the general noise level is muted enough to feel lively yet allow for conversation — something that has become a rarity in a contemporary dining scene that often seems to amp up the decibels to nightclub level.

Such a comfortably stylish atmosphere would enhance any food, but the food at Mill's is exceptional. Anyone who dines out often knows that it's rare to have a restaurant meal that's without flaw. There are just too many elements — timing, ingredients, choice of dish — that can be off on any given night. But a recent dinner at Mill's satisfied on all counts, from the host's willingness to move us to a different table when we found ourselves seated too close to a shouter, to the thoughtful menu and wine suggestions made by our waitress, to the soft tub of butter served with slices of fresh Olga's Bakery raisin-fennel bread, to the napkins dampened with warm water and brought with

lemon.wedges to our table after we'd finished our littlenecks appetizer.

Those littlenecks, which are braised in a spicy Portuguese-inspired broth combining tomato and Narragansett Ale with sauteed red onions and bits of grilled chorizo sausage (\$12), are one of Mill's signature dishes, always on the menu and always delicious. With grilled slices of Olga's country-style bread on the side, one could easily make a bar meal out of the littlenecks alone. Nothing overwhelms anything else, and everything enhances the whole.

Another perfect starter that is substantial enough to be a light meal on its own is the pan-seared sea scallops (\$14). Four to six large sea scallops — caramelized to a perfect brownness on the outside and tender within — are served atop a "hash" that incorporates



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / SANDOR BODO

An appetizer of pan-seared sea scallops, served over a hash of sweet potato and pancetta and accented with chorizo-infused aioli, at Mill's Tavern in Providence.

chopped sweet potato and pancetta, and topped with a ribbon of chorizo-infused aioli.

Playing a riff on iceberg lettuce salad is the Mill's version: An ample cross-section sliced from the heart of the lettuce head is topped with a round of crisp-cooked pancetta and a gently fried egg (\$11). A blue-cheese "fondue" and a truffled vinaigrette dressing finish the presentation with aplomb.

From a lengthy list of tempting entrees, we chose the herb-crusted rack of lamb (\$34), a signature dish that Chef Pieper told me later is so popular that it is a staple on the menu. (The menu at Mill's changes seasonally.)

The 18-ounce rack was perfectly cooked to a pink "medium," each piece meaty and not at all greasy, its outer edge coated with a Pommery mustard and horseradish panko-crumb crust and served with a rosemary demi-glace. Accompanying the rack on the plate were goat-cheese mashed potatoes and haricots vert (slim whole green beans) sautéed with a beurre blanc sauce.

Our other choice was equally inspired: Maryland

projo.com

MORE, PLEASE!

This restaurant's menu, and recent reviews and menus: projo.com/food

striped sea bass served with a julienned "slaw" of root vegetables and accompanied by a purée of braised celeryroot and rutabaga (\$27). The fresh fish was perfectly cooked to be flaky and tender, the vegetables infusing it with rustic flavor.

An à la carte side dish of wood-roasted asparagus (\$8.50) was a generously sized portion of bright green thin spears, perfectly roasted to give them a woody flavor, lightly glazed with butter, topped with thin shavings of Parmesan and presented with a pair of silver tongs for serving.

At the suggestion of our waitress, Lynne, we enjoyed glasses of Napa Valley Abbeyville Chardonnay and an Australian McWilliams Shiraz (each \$8.50).

Lynne also guided us through the dessert menu, steering us to two good choices that she described as her favorites, both the creations of pastry chef

Samantha Del Arroyo. A fine crème brulee (\$8) was served with a thin chocolate galette filled with a dollop of warm berry compote, and a molded raspberry mousse (also \$8) was stylishly presented with chocolate swizzle sticks, a scoop of house-made chocolate sorbet, a scattering of liqueur-soaked fresh raspberries and a mango coulis.

The mousse, especially, made a light and refreshing finish to what had been a perfectly satisfying meal.

At six years old and counting, earthy and elegant Mill's Tavern deserves its place in the ever-changing pantheon of Providence's very best dining spots. Its dining room is open later than many others in the city (to 10 or 11 p.m. most nights), and — new for winter — a prix-fixe menu (three courses for \$29.95) makes it an especially enticing option for Sunday-to-Thursday diners, a coveted breed just now, when the combined factors of dismal economic news, dropping temperatures and post-holiday bills-come-due have thinned the ranks of die-hard diners.

kimbrie@projo.com / (401) 277-7630



Raspberry mousse comes with chocolate swizzle sticks, chocolate sorbet and a mango coulis.

caramelized to a perfect brownness on the outside and tender within — are served atop a "hash" that incorporates

ART

Mall squatters have more art up their sleeves

Last fall, members of Providence's Trummerkind art collective became instant celebrities when one of their more audacious projects — a secret

ART SCENE | Bill Van Siclen

"apartment" inside Providence Place mall — was uncovered by mall security guards. The discovery led to the arrest of the group's leader, Michael Townsend, and prompted mall owner General Growth Properties to file a lawsuit against the collective's core group of six to seven artist-provocateurs.

Nevertheless, the story of how a plucky band of artists managed to live, off and on, inside the mall for nearly four years without being caught seemed to capture the public's imagination. (Townsend, who followed news coverage of the event online, says the story circulated as far away as Pakistan and South Africa.)

Before their mall-squatting exploits became famous, however, Townsend and his Trummerkind crew were best known for another kind of artistic intervention.

Specifically, they were known for creating elaborate murals using little more than strips of colored painter's tape. Over the past few years, these "tape art" murals have popped up in a dizzying array of locations — everywhere from the streets of New York City (where Townsend and his group created a tribute to the victims of the 9/11 suicide attacks) to local schools and hospitals.

Now comes "Tape Art Artaquarium," Trummerkind's new installation cum-performance piece at Providence's 5 Traverse Gallery. Like the group's mall-apartment project, the "Artaquarium" is a quirky blend of performance art and reality TV. For the next three weeks, for example, Trummerkind members will be at the gallery 24/7, taking turns living, sleeping, working and hanging out. They're also documenting their activities and posting the results online. (You'll find the live video feed at www.tapeart.com.)

SEE "TAPE ART", E10



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL / SANDOR BODO

The latest exhibit/installation from the Trummerkind art collective (aka "the mall artists"), is taking place this month at the 5 Traverse Gallery in Providence's Fox Point. Collective members are living inside the gallery while creating a mural on the gallery's walls. Above, James J.A. Mercer works on the mural in the background as Michael Townsend talks to a visitor.