

Bywater Bistro - swell food in Rosendale

December 01, 2006

Rosendale has always been a sleepy little town, perhaps more so as winter begins to settle in. A drive down the narrow main street early one Friday night reveals hardly a light or soul to be seen.

There is the movie house, an anchor for this small hamlet, along with an art gallery, still open and shining bright. And then there is Bywater Bistro, a cozy and cool new restaurant.

Bywater has settled into the space once occupied by the Rosendale Cement Company, and the restaurants share a similar style of food, but more about that later. The space itself is stylish; stucco walls are sponge-painted in a light brown so the colors fade and darken to form a lovely pattern. Futuristic wall sconces and chandeliers, modern paintings, sturdy tile floor and solid mission-style furniture contribute to a Southwestern-style motif. Tables are set nicely with folded napkins holding the silverware, lit candles giving off a warm glow, kosher salt in small ceramic cups and the tablecloths covered in a light brown paper that is both functional and attractive. The room is very, warm, fashionable and welcoming. Also, in warmer weather there is a splendid outside deck to dine on.

By the time you read this it will be over, but this restaurant is one of many participating in the Hudson Valley Restaurant Week, a terrific promotion for the Valley's restaurants with some of the proceeds going to charity. The main menu here features a nice selection of contemporary American selections along with a lighter Bar Plates section. In addition, many of the entrees on the regular menu are available as half-plates at reduced prices, a nice idea. Then there is the price fixe Restaurant Week menu that offers an appetizer, entree and dessert at a very reasonable \$26.

So when we see an appetizer of Foie Gras Mousse With Green Salad and Chips on the price fixe menu, we can't resist trying it. How can the chef offer luxurious and pricey foie gras at this price? The answer reveals itself when the plate arrives. A tidy pile of mesclun, barely dressed, centers the plate and is ringed by small purple potato chips that are absolutely addictive. On each of the chips is a tiny smear of light, tan foie gras mousse. And while the portion of foie gras is meager, it is delicious, and the trio forms a lovely appetizer. This is a nice attempt, but a bit puzzling, since it's more salad than mousse.

My appetizer, on the other hand, is enormous and generously portioned. Scallion and Hamachi Tartare (\$10) arrives on another toss of mesclun and is the size of a hockey puck. Hamachi, also known as Yellow Tail or Amberjack, is a popular item at sushi bars. Here it's roughly chopped, mixed with scallions and spices and topped with a tiny quail egg, like a traditional tartare. The fish itself is very rich and buttery, and the Asian spices play wonderfully off the salad dressed in vinaigrette with the potent zing of wasabi. This is a wonderful dish, almost too large a portion.

Entrees are also creative and intriguing. My guest tries one of the house specialties from the price fixe menu. Brooklyn Brown Ale Braised Short Ribs are presented as a single rib wrapped around the bone in an unusual presentation. They are melt-in-your-mouth tender, deeply flavored and meaty, a perfect fall dish. Alongside are good mashed potatoes and glazed carrots.

We also sample Boneless Slow-Cooked Pork (\$18), another large portion of boneless spare ribs. Three flat pieces of pork are slathered in a sweet, spicy and balanced barbecue sauce that doesn't overwhelm the pork's piggy goodness. The side dishes here are both stellar. Dirty rice is filled with black beans, onions and spices and is packed with wonderful, earthy flavors. And the coleslaw here reconfigures the heavy, mayonnaise-laden version into a light and flavorful cabbage salad that is another eye-opener.

Dessert is also a revelation, Figgy Date Bread Pudding, part of the price fixe dinner, is served as a wedge of ooey gooey sweet and sassy cake that packs tons of flavor onto the plate. Served with a dollop of whipped cream, it tops off our dinner nicely.

With dinner we drink a Ventisquero Reserve Pinot Noir (\$21) from the Casablanca valley in Chile. Another winner from South America, the wine is light, with good fruit and is a fine match to our entrees.

Service is attentive, intelligent and precise. Our water glasses are always refilled, silver is replaced, and our waitress is always there for us, a real pleasure.

Dinner comes to a very reasonable \$77 from the price fixe menu, a wonderful value for flavorful and creative cuisine.

Bywater Bistro reminds me of the former occupant of this space, which bothers me a bit, since the Cement Factory didn't survive. This place is fabulous. The creative, contemporary cuisine is perfect for the modern, stylish space. The service here was top-notch and the prices and menu offer something for every style and taste. Sleepy Rosendale has another winner; we hope it has a long and fruitful life.

Restaurant critic Bill Guilfoyle has more than 25 years experience in the restaurant industry as a sommelier, manager and chef/owner. He is an associate professor at a local college.

Bywater Bistro

Where: 419 Main St., Rosendale

Phone: 658-3210

Web: www.bywaterbistro.com

Entree price range: \$15-\$24

Hours/days: brunch — 11 a.m.-2 p.m. Sat.-Sun.; dinner — 5-10 p.m. Thurs.-Mon.; closed Tues.-Wed.

Children's menu: on request

Parking: nearby municipal parking

Reservations: for parties of five or more

Full bar

Handicapped-accessible: limited

Low-fat/vegetarian menu: vegetarian on the menu, low fat on request

Other amenities: on- and off-premise catering, takeout, private parties, outdoor dining in season

Signature dishes: Crab Cake Over Braised Oxtail, Brooklyn Brown Ale Braised Short Ribs, Colorado Lamb Loin Chops

Credit cards: American Express, MasterCard, Visa

The Dish rating

Decor: ****

Service: ****

Food: ****

Value: ****

Overall: ****