

DINNER REVIEW:

## Fine food, reasonably priced, at bustling Front Room

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The Front Room is busy.

Despite taking no reservations, despite or perhaps because of a deafening noise level and inevitable waits, customers flock here eager to scarf down meals that flaunt rich flavor and admirable simplicity.

Chef/owner Harding Lee Smith, with past employment at Mim's and Back Bay Grill, has the chops for more elaborate food, but here he has arranged dishes for customers who want to eat deliciously without paying through the nose.

Those on the strictest budget can make do here with macaroni and cheese with a side of vegetables for \$9. Meatloaf with mashed potatoes, vegetables and gravy is only \$3 more. Sandwiches are available at dinner priced \$5 to \$9.

But luckily I enjoyed the reasonably priced, more sophisticated fare, delectable short ribs and a soft-shell crab special (both \$16) that gave that seasonal pleasure a mouthwatering foundation of saffron rice, peas and leeks. And even though I did not for budgetary reasons eat every last bite - as two college-age women beside us did saying, "We have to eat everything on the plates" - there was no question I had been well-fed.

Which brings up the issue of noise, in relentless abundance here. For those whose excitement feeds off noise, this is the place to be. But unless you can come at off hours, perhaps a midweek late morning, lovers of quiet will stay away.

A six-month-long renovation of the restaurant followed Smith's design, making the restaurant an elegant open space with handsome details. Columns and tabletops are old growth mahogany. The space had been empty for 25 years, and the building required shoring up as well as cosmetic work, Smith said.

He was also pleased to be adding three sidewalk tables for outside dining.

Wine by the glass comes in a generous range of varieties, 11 of both white and red; but you can also order a carafe that holds three glasses. We drank the dark, soft and perhaps oversweet red zinfandel, Ravenswood Lodi, a vintner's reserve according to the server (\$9 a glass, \$17 a carafe).

The salmon pastrami appetizer (\$9) held all good qualities with tender salmon brightened by a little pickling, sharp grain mustard, sour cream and pickled red onion, but the thick round of moist brown bread underneath seemed to overwhelm the delicate fish.

A special salad (\$9) was in perfect balance, an oval plate of immaculate arugula interspersed with bits of roasted red pepper, Sunset Acres goat-milk feta and raw red cabbage.

Baked cheese, crab cakes, scallops and bacon (all \$8) and chicken liver pate (\$6) are just some of the reason to return, along with soups and pasta that can be served as an appetizer, like gnocchi with mussels (\$12 as an entrée, \$7 as an appetizer).

The soft-shell crab special accomplished that lovely trick with this creature of sautéing the outer, tender shell to a moderate crispness while leaving the creamy interior moist and full of salty flavor. It lay on top of a soupy mass of saffron rice with peas and leeks braised to utter tenderness. Leeks make things so good it's strange to realize, as reported in The New York Times, they were spurned until the invention of Vichyssoise.

Short ribs, a cheap cut also formerly ignored, lay in its tender, braised perfection on rich mashed potatoes, with a welcome sour note from braised cabbage.



Staff photo by Doug Jones

Diners on a tight budget may enjoy the macaroni and cheese with side of vegetables for \$9, but there is plenty of more sophisticated fare.

Tuna steak, roasted salmon, and lamb sirloin (all \$17) are some more of the 11 menu regulars, all exactly right meals that anyone who wasn't worried about a waistline would opt for every night of the week. Mushroom ragu with "cheesy polenta" (\$12) is a vegetarian choice.

My friend and I loved the blackberry sorbet (\$3) for dessert, an intense, smooth cold dessert that didn't pile on any more butterfat, even if it did carry a charge of sugar. An individual galette, hand-formed pastry with rhubarb and apple (\$5) had its rich pastry in its favor, but the fruit had slightly dried out instead of achieving tenderness.

A place that does such a huge brunch business shouldn't have its brunch menu ignored. The eggs benedict (\$7) here is fabulous, with a paprika hollandaise sauce as lush and lemony as can be desired and buttery biscuits under the tender eggs and ham. A side of home fries (\$1.50) came glistening with somewhat too much oil, but that was only a problem once our appetites began to fade.

Indeed, the scrumptious fried egg sandwich with blue cheese and bacon (\$6) has the same issue, since it satisfies any hunger within moments of starting it. But we have only ourselves to blame, since we ordered a wedge of the moist, buttery apple coffee cake (\$1.75) to appease hunger that had intensified over our half hour wait at the bar.

A Bloody Mary (\$4.50) at the bar hadn't stopped hunger, and with its depth charge of horseradish, and intense saltiness probably drove my appetite into high gear as I waited.

## **HOW IT RATES:**

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**The Front Room:** 73 Congress St. Portland

**HOURS:** Dinner 5 p.m. to 10 p.m., brunch 8 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. except Monday and Tuesday until mid-July. Sunday dinner starts at 4.

**CREDIT CARDS:** Visa, MC and Discover

**PRICE RANGE:** \$9 to \$18

**VEGETARIAN DISHES:** Yes

**RESERVATIONS:** Not accepted - be prepared for a wait

**BAR:** Full

**WHEELCHAIR ACCESS:** Yes

**BOTTOM LINE:** A noisy spot thronged with customers, with well-made dishes that deserve their popularity and daily specials worth checking out.