

PORTLAND[®]

MONTHLY

The Front Room

reviewed by Diane Hudson February 2006

Harding Lee Smith, former executive chef at Mims and sous chef at Back Bay Grill, is packing the house nightly at The Front Room on the crest of Munjoy Hill, conveniently opposite theater events at St. Lawrence Arts and Community Center.

To say this place is popular is a bit of an understatement: In fact, the couple seated next to us were dining here for “the third time in one week.”

Here in these rathskellar-like environs of exposed brick halfway below the sidewalk, there's a full bar as well as an ambitious wine list. We opted for 14 Hands Merlot (\$17), a mild-mannered red that worked well throughout our dinner selections.

For starters, we enjoyed French Onion Soup (\$5) and a plate of robust, delicious Grilled Chicken Livers with incredibly good bacon and sauteed onions (\$7), so zesty we'll come back for them alone.

Next, we tore into The Front Room's already-famous Braised Beef Shortrib (\$16, available after 6 p.m.). Fork-tender, this signature dish, slowly roasted before being marinated in red wine, then braised for three hours in the wine and beef stock, is almost beyond belief in its lusciousness. The accompanying mouth-watering horseradish-mashed potatoes and roasted cabbage couldn't be better.

Other entrees include Oven-roasted Pork Chop (\$15), Roasted One-half Bird (\$13), Grilled Meatloaf (\$12), Grilled Tuna Steak (\$17), Pan-roasted Lamb Sirloin (\$15), Vegetarian Pot Pie (\$11), and Local Cod Braised with Onions, Wine, and Gnocchi (\$16).

Sliding into a pasta dish, Pan-fried Gnocchi, Mussels, Garlic, and Herbs (\$12), my partner was equally thrilled with his dinner. The gnocchi, made from Yukon gold potatoes, flour, and farm eggs, are mighty fine little dumplings. The tender, fresh Bang's Island mussels cooked in garlic, thyme, vermouth, fish stock, and buttered leeks were out of this world.

Totally satiated, we could do no more than entertain the idea of dessert, again consisting of the best of all possible crowd pleasers: house-made vanilla and chocolate ice cream, fudge brownie, classic cheesecake, fruit cobbler, and creme brulée.

The Front Room is a knockout. It goes to the front of the class among the ever-burgeoning competitive eateries gracing Portland's culinary scene. Bravo!

The Front Room, 73 Congress Street, Portland. Serving brunch and dinner daily. 773-3366 or www.thefrontroomrestaurant.com