



SEARED IDAHO RAINBOW TROUT



CAULIFLOWER STEAK

Caroline's Restaurant

Diversified Menu for Wide-Ranging Clientele

By Sunil Malapati

Like the stolid Hotel Julien Dubuque, some version of which has occupied the corner of 2nd and Main St. since 1839, Caroline's Restaurant offers the warmth of tradition with hints of modernity. Like the river town in which it is located, the restaurant periodically reinvents itself while staying true to its roots. After all, people have been coming for decades to this restaurant named after Caroline Rhomberg Fischer, one of the great businesswomen of 19th century Dubuque, and have certain expectations. At the same time, the food scene has become a lot more adventurous in the past few years. Chef Michael Henson seems well positioned to design a menu that caters to a very diverse clientele.

Chef Henson hails from around Dayton, OH, and has amassed experience working around the country, most notably spending the past decade in Bozeman, MT. He also worked in rustic

fine dining and gourmet pizza places, including one that milled its own flours. He applied to Caroline's wanting to be closer to his wife's family in Dubuque. Michael's wide-ranging experiences inform the menu that aims to satisfy many different discriminating palates. When asked about his approach to designing the menu (which changes three to four times a year), he told me that he tried to expand the use of seasonal ingredients while fusing international flavors and balancing those flavors with different textures.

I recently had the pleasure of tasting food during a training session for the waitstaff. I was provided a unique vantage point into the operations of a restaurant that cares about every aspect of the food experience—the waitstaff was quite frank with their observations and had a certain no-nonsense approach to food. Quality restaurants take the time to have their waitstaff taste the entire menu so they can intelligently talk to the customers. This is not to simply recommend favorites; it is imperative in today's age with dietary restrictions and allergies. Chef Henson's experience in Montana has made him attentive to providing gluten-free and vegan options and alerting the waitstaff to potential allergens in each dish. While noting that Caroline's does have breakfast and lunch menus (and a fabulous brunch on weekends), I will restrict myself here to the new menu that goes into effect this week.

First, "Something to Start," or the appetizers. The expected charcuterie plate is great to share with a group: a good mixture of hearty sausages (a standout boar-cranberry sausage), cheeses (the

honey-drizzled chevre is delightful), and pickled vegetables with a bracing acidity to cut through the fat. Among the smaller plates, I was partial to the Sesame Tuna and the Mushroom and Polenta. The sesame-crusted tuna served with forbidden rice (black nutty rice) was umami-forward with a soy-forward flavor profile enhanced by scallion oil and a red pepper coulis. The fried polenta cakes were stuffed with shiitake mushrooms and served with a rich cream sauce—I could see myself eating this symphony of flavors and textures as an entrée on a lighter day! The fried calamari was accompanied by a "spicy harissa aioli"—while tasty, I did not find it particularly spicy. The New Mexico and guajillo chilies used are mild, and the harissa aioli worked better in the salmon entrée where it complemented the fish.

In the soups and salads section, I was pleased to see that the old favorites white bean chili and Paradise Salad were still present. One of the new offerings I would definitely recommend is the IPA poached shrimp salad. The shrimp are gently poached in Easy Eddie IPA and tossed in a creamy dill dressing with celery and red onion and served in butter bib lettuce for a perfect late-summer bite. The IPA provides a background bitter note to the sweetness of the shrimp and peppery celery, the herbal notes of dill complementing the faint citrus notes of the IPA. I did not find the same balance in the Quinoa and Broccoli Agrodolce—the sweet and sour dressing did not completely counteract the overly cruciferous notes of the roasted broccoli (the rest of the salad was well composed in flavor and texture).

The entrée menu is helpfully divided into meat, vegetarian, and pasta options. First, you have a choice of locally-sourced Angus steaks: ribeye, filet mignon, or K.C. strip served with beautifully blanched broccolini and smashed potatoes. The K.C. or Kansas City strip is the same as the NY strip but with the bone still intact. Since it has slightly less fat than the ribeye, the bone helps lock the moisture in. We tasted the K.C. strip with garlic and herb Boursin cheese, the richness of the cheese complementing the juicy steak. Blue cheese, poblano cream sauce, and pumpkin Worcestershire butter are the other options available.

Poultry also offers three choices, this time with three very different preparations. The pretzel-crusted chicken, introduced last year with great success, is the stand-out entrée. The quaintly named airline chicken (boneless chicken with drumette) is breaded with pretzel crumbs, the crisp breading encasing gorgeously moist white meat. The pretzel flavor comes through and is matched with a lovely honey mustard sauce. The other airline chicken dish is stuffed with blue cheese and pecans and slathered with BBQ sauce—as someone who hates blue cheese, I was surprised by how well I liked the balance of flavors between the funky blue cheese and sour-sweet barbecue sauce. The wine-braised thighs speak of Mediterranean flavors, with classic French mirepoix, Lima beans, and fried garlic bits with jasmine rice adding a unique touch. The chevre on top adds a great tangy touch.

With pork, you can either get the Baby Back Ribs slathered in Sugar Ray's BBQ



K.C. STRIP



IPA POACHED SHRIMP SALAD

sauce or the Two Bone Stuffed Chop. The former is exactly as sticky and delicious as you want it to be. The latter is a pork loin stuffed with a creamy corn salsa and accompanied by a tomato-onion galette and seasonal vegetables. While I liked all the components separately, the dish had too many sweet elements in one place. The galette with summer tomatoes and caramelized onions was a lot more successful in the vegetarian Cauliflower Steak entrée where it was balanced by a sharp lemony gremolata and brininess of the capers. The cauliflower steak itself is steamed in the oven and then seared on a griddle for a great balance of textures. Vegans are not after-thoughts on this menu, with another intelligently composed dish, namely Fried Tofu and Banana Curry. The yellow banana is pureed in the curry with roasted carrots, tomato, zucchini, and squash providing textures; the curry ladled atop jasmine rice. The fried tofu is crispy on the outside and creamy on the inside, and the whole dish works harmoniously. I would suggest cooking the curry just a tad more so the curry powder fully loses its acidity.

Seafood lovers have three very different choices. The Idaho Rainbow Trout is served with a crispy skin and a charred lemon beurre blanc. The charred lemon adds a deeper citrus flavor and a smoky note to the sauce that helps the fish shine. The Cedar Plank Salmon benefits both from the subtle cedar flavor and the “spicy” harissa aioli—the relative lack of spiciness in the harissa helps accentuate the cedar and salmon flavors in this case. The Blackened Mahi Mahi is a lovely tropical composition with a fruity pineapple salsa and coconut jasmine rice, perfect for a light dinner.

As part of the waitstaff training, I also got to taste a whole bunch of mocktails. Assistant Manager Rebecca Williams and Restaurant Manager Lisa Connor have put together a whole list of mocktails to debut with the new menu. The Strawberry Escape, a mixture of lemonade, strawberry

syrup, and fresh strawberry, was my favorite for this late summertime. The Cranberry Old Fashioned with macerated Bing cherries had a complex aftertaste of cherries and bitters. They also offer a long list of Moscow Mules named after different places based on the flavor—for example, the Milan has blood orange while the Lexington uses whiskey. A cute little conceit!

Caroline’s borrows its hospitality philosophy from Hotel Julien Dubuque in which it is situated—providing some old-fashioned comfort with updated modern trappings. Echoes of distant shores knock on the door, but the sensibility remains stolidly Midwestern. ■



Caroline’s Restaurant
HOTEL JULIEN DUBUQUE
200 MAIN ST, DUBUQUE, IA
563-588-5595
HOTELJULIENDUBUQUE.COM
FACEBOOK: @CAROLINESRESTAURANTHJD
Hours: Mon–Fri: 7–10:30 AM,
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