



PRIME RIB



STUFFED CHICKEN FLORENTINE



EGGPLANT PARMESAN

Stone Cliff Winery Creates a “Killer” Menu for a Murder Mystery

By Bryce Parks

Dinner theater consists of two very important ingredients: dinner and... yup, theater. Try to keep up! I state the obvious because so often these kinds of productions seem to focus on one or the other of those ingredients and allows the other to ride on the coattails of the first. While the dinner theater at Stone Cliff has always received high marks, the crew was not resting on their laurels. They asked for serious critiques of the events and decided from that feedback that, if anything, the food could take it up a notch to turn the experience into high marks across the board.

And that’s exactly what they did. Chef Molly McCullough, who already built a great short-order menu at Stone Cliff, embarked on creating an elevated multi-course banquet offering. We at *365ink* were among the first to test drive the new, all in-house entrées to accompany our enjoyment of the night production of *Cooties* by the Brew Ha Ha Players on site at the winery in the history Star Brewery at the Port of Dubuque.

Now, if you’ve ever had lunch at Stone Cliff, you already know that it’s a hidden gem in downtown, especially on summer days when you can enjoy that food on the patio/amphitheater just outside the tasting room. We are particularly addicted to the chicken salad sliders on warm pretzel rolls. They’re just great and available even outside of lunchtime on the appetizer menu.

With a talented chef at the wheel, they’ve gone all in on presenting a four-star dinner to go with the completely goofball comedy provided by Brew Ha Ha. This meant dropping the previously catered fare for fresh-from-scratch entrées prepared right on site, as well as appetizers and desserts to accompany the already delicious wine, one thing on the playbill that didn’t need to be changed a bit!

Although, let me say that the recent revival of the legendary Dubuque Star Beer, the libation for which the building is named, returned in 2022, and I can attest that it is an excellent brew. I had a couple different kinds just to make sure. Yep, it was right on the first pint. Dubuque Star Beer is very good. I honestly can’t say if



PHOTO: BOB FELDERMAN

that was even true the first time around over 100 years back. So maybe the emulator has exceeded its namesake. Very likely.

But the food, the food! That’s what we’re here to talk about. So let’s dig in.

We started our dinner with generous skewers of shrimp cocktail and caprese skewers. What’s that? Fresh mozzarella balls, chewy tomatoes, and fresh basil drizzled with a little balsamic vinaigrette. Fresh and lovely.

The next course was a salad of fresh mixed greens with feta cheese, dried cranberries, red onion, and cucumber and a choice of fresh ranch or balsamic vinaigrette dressing. I’ve always had a thing for the feta/cranberry pairing.

The new menu had three entrées to choose from: prime rib, stuffed chicken Florentine, and a vegetarian-friendly

eggplant Parmesan. Being the scientists that we are, we tried them all. I had the prime rib, and it was fantastic. A great medium rare with a wonderful seasoning and very generous portion. I’m a big boy, and it was plenty for me.

The chicken Florentine was an equally impressive serving. A big chicken breast was presented lightly seasoned and stuffed with spinach with a lovely Florentine sauce that features butter, garlic, shallots, chicken broth, and cream to give the dish a smooth, mild flavor, tasty and accessible to most everyone with a pulse.

The vegetarian option was no afterthought. I say that because so often it seems like they are. This meat lover would have been completely pleased had I only been served this hearty helping of eggplant Parmesan. It must have been a couple of



SHRIMP COCKTAIL AND CAPRESE SKEWERS



SALAD WITH BALSAMIC VINAIGRETTE



LEMON TART CHEESECAKE

layers of eggplant thick, coated in toasted breadcrumbs and layered with marinara and melted cheese. I didn't miss the meat at all.

All of the meals were served with sautéed green beans, roasted garlic mashed potatoes, rolls, and butter. The beans were sautéed with something that elevated them above boring, as banquet beans can so often be. A bit of zip in there was a welcome treat. I've written this before, but it just takes a little effort to take veggies above blasé, and they did. And who on Earth doesn't love a healthy portion of roasted garlic potatoes. Bring it!

When they asked for our honest critiques of the evening's meals, our collective first thoughts were that they needed bigger plates. The servings were very generous, and the 10" plate didn't give a lot of room to cut into that gorgeous prime rib. So if that's a critique, I'd take it and run, Stone Cliff crew!

We were served Stone Cliff's own award-winning cabernet sauvignon and riesling by the bottle during dinner which paired well with our entrées. After dinner, we had a little of the heavier and spicy tawny port wine. A little dab will do ya. The stuff is strong at 18% alcohol by volume.

The dessert game was strong too with a delectable lemon tart cheesecake. It was so unfortunate that my wife was too full for hers, so I had to eat it for her. I just try to help out where I can.

So we sat back, well-stuffed, just in time for the players to return to the room and expose the killer. But I can tell you who the killer was... It was Stone Cliff Chef Molly McCullough and her killer new banquet menu. See what I did there! ;))

So fear not. No tired green bean almondine, iceberg lettuce with the little orange slices, roast beef in gravy, or soggy fried chicken here folks. This is the real deal, prepared with care and great flavors. And if your experience mimics our own, you're in for an encore-worthy performance.

This whole experience was a great date and a fun night out with friends, but it would be a totally excellent setting for a group event like an office party, family gathering, or a tour group. It was unique, fun, and delicious and an experience you will remember, not just a good show or a great meal. The best of both worlds. And the \$70 per-person price is very fair for the night you'll have.

Plus, you can take home some of the wine at the end, too!

The Brew Ha-Ha Players are hosting one performance each month (two in December). Read more about the Players on page 24, and reserve a seat for an upcoming performance at StoneCliffWinery.com. ■

**Stone Cliff Winery
Murder Mystery Dinner**
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