



SALT BLOCK DIVER SCALLOPS



B.E.L.T SANDWICH



HAZELNUT ENCRUSTED COLEMAN FREE RANGE CHICKEN

CAROLINE'S

A PAEAN TO TRADITION AND TECHNIQUE

BY SUNIL MALAPATI

When my friends and I are planning a dinner some weekend and someone occasionally mentions Caroline's, we all suddenly remember that it exists and it is always reliably good. Maybe because it is not the New Young Thing, or maybe because it is tucked away behind Hotel Julien Dubuque and not directly on Main St, we tend to forget Caroline's. Much like the stolid Hotel Julien Dubuque, some version of which has occupied the corner of 2nd and Main since 1839, Caroline's feels reassuring.

Over the past three weeks, I visited Caroline's for a brunch buffet, lunch, and dinner with various friends. Each time, I was greeted with a warm inviting space with comfortable booths and well-spaced tables allowing for leisurely conversations while the attentive service took care of food and drink needs. The food was always expertly prepared subtly showcasing good technique from the kitchen staff. For example, the omelets at brunch were fluffy and cooked without any browning while the fried egg on a lunch sandwich had unctuous yolk still oozing out. Egg cookery is always a good way to judge technique from any kitchen, and Caroline's consistently delivered.

I asked Executive Chef Jason Culbertson how he ensures such consistency when he is not always present for every meal. He emphasized the importance of training his staff and the use of a good recipe book. His recipe book has an extensive list of ingredients and process steps with pictures of how food is supposed to look. The cook at the omelet station on a Sunday brunch knew how much heat to use and when to fold the eggs to achieve uniform cooking without browning ("Eggs are yellow, not brown," quipped Chef Jason), while the line cook at lunch knew how to fry an egg for the whites to completely cook while the yolk stayed intact.

Chef Jason Culbertson joined Caroline's three years ago after seven years at Woodfire Grill inside Diamond Jo Casino. He is classically trained at Le Cordon Bleu in Twin Cities, MN, and has previously worked in various places in Minnesota and helped open the restaurant at Potosi Brewing Company in Wisconsin. I asked him about his approach to food at Caroline's, and he talked about pushing the envelope delicately while maintaining the tradition. A hotel-associated restaurant has different expectations than a chef-designed restaurant, especially one with a storied history. Caroline's is named after Caroline (Rhombberg) Fischer, one of the great businesswomen of 19th century Dubuque. People have been coming to the restaurant for decades and have expectations. Chef Jason intends to keep them satisfied with such staples as their White Bean Chicken Chili and the Paradise Salad, while adding touches of his own in other parts of the menu. For example, the Paradise Salad currently incorporates candied walnuts and dried cranberries, while in summer fresh berries may find other complementary greens. The dinner menu changes three to four times a year, incorporating seasonal ingredients but always has chicken, beef and salmon dishes. Local produce is highlighted, including local meats and baked goods sourced from Millwork Bakery and East Mill Bakery.

The Sunday brunch buffet, a relatively new happening, is a hefty affair. There is an a la carte breakfast menu if you are looking for something light, and I recommend the classic Eggs Benedict with luscious Hollandaise sauce. Our brunch group was quite large, and we made several trips to the buffet, some of us trying to artistically arrange food so Kristina could take good pictures! The chafing dishes held biscuits and gravy, scrambled eggs, sausage and bacon, cheesy potatoes, pancakes and

blintzes. There were cakes and pastries and fresh cut fruit and oatmeal. And of course, the aforementioned omelet station, with an impressive array of toppings and a choice of cheddar or goat cheese. The omelet was rather large and quite filling, all by itself. One of our group members had a gluten allergy and that limited her choices on the buffet—a not uncommon issue on breakfast issues as flour forms a huge part of many breakfast dishes.

The lunch menu has a range of options from light fare like salads to slightly heavier options like the recently introduced Italian Meat sandwich. The latter has proven to be quite a favorite with local Iowa beef, ham and salami topped with caramelized onions, tomato and Gouda cheese, all nestled in billowy focaccia bread. The B.E.L.T is another favorite: a splendid variation on the BLT with an over easy egg added for another layer of flavor. I had a cup of their famous white bean chicken chili and Korean Barbecue Beef Street Tacos. The chili, like any good chili, had layers of flavor and warmed me up considerably on a cold winter day. The beef in the tacos packed a lot of flavor with the hoisin and soy sauces complemented with ginger and sesame. The napa cabbage added crunch—I wanted a little more heat and wonder if thinly sliced kimchi may have added a punch.

The dinner menu clearly lays out the philosophy of the restaurant. Simply designed with a welcoming statement by Chef Jason and woodcut renderings of some ingredients, the menu highlights local ingredients like Iowa Premium Beef (farm-raised and corn-fed Black Angus) and Coleman Free Range Chicken. The dishes offer an impressive variety of flavors while remaining approachable to the Midwesterner. There are the expected offerings: cheese and charcuterie plate, wedge salad, steaks, and burgers. Tempura Asparagus with a



SUNDAY BRUNCH BUFFET OMELET

yuzu ginger sauce or a Mediterranean flatbread with various accompaniments hint at flavors from the world outside.

On a frigid Friday evening with the Polar vortex temporarily in retreat, we decided on an early dinner at Caroline's (always good before a theatre show or some other performance at Five Flags). The relaxing atmosphere allowed us to have an unhurried evening after a long taxing work week—our server was attentive without hovering over us constantly and we appreciated that. The soup of the day was a creamy corn chowder with roasted red peppers and heat from Fresno chilies and it warmed us right up. I decided to try the Hazelnut encrusted Coleman Free Range Chicken with grilled asparagus on the side. The crusting was gorgeous and packed with flavor while the chicken stuffed with baby spinach, roasted red peppers and smoked Gouda was tender and moist. A creamy sauce would have made it perfect. My friends had a chicken roulade and a ribeye. The roulade had chicken beaten thin, layered with prosciutto, Swiss cheese and Dijon cream, wrapped and beautifully cooked. The ribeye was cooked medium as my friend wanted, and she was utterly content.

I rarely order dessert but will make an exception for Chef Jason's Crème Brulee.



CRÈME BRULEE

I am always partial to a good Crème Brulee with its amazing play of textures. It looks so simple—a ramekin with a hard, brown crust of caramelized sugar, the Brulee part of the dish. There may be some fruit on top for decoration and additional texture. When you crack open that brown crust and dig into the creamy custard underneath, the full symphony of flavor and texture reveals itself. The soft velvety custard juxtaposed against the hard crackling caramelized sugar. Eggs, cream, sugar, vanilla—four ingredients in a classic Crème Brulee, and it is all about perfect technique that yields that complex symphony. I first encountered Chef Jason's Crème Brulee when he gave a tour of Woodfire Grill to my Food Science students. He showed us how he was experimenting with sous vide techniques to get the texture of the custard just right. I am glad he brought that to Caroline's because his Crème Brulee is a gift from the dessert gods.

Hotel Julien Dubuque underwent significant renovation and restoration in the new century, retaining the traditional façade but adding many modern amenities throughout. Caroline's is doing the same, retaining old world luxury and traditional dishes while adding modern (and modernist) techniques to enhance the menu. ■



CAROLINE'S RESTAURANT
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Hours: Mon–Thu: 7 AM–2 PM, 5–9 PM;
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Sun: 7 AM–1 PM, 5–9 PM

SUNIL MALAPATI

SUNIL IS NERDY ABOUT ALL THINGS FOOD, SCIENCE, FOOD SCIENCE AND THEATRE. HE WILL GLADLY ANSWER YOUR QUESTIONS (AS WELL AS BORE YOU WITH FOOD LORE) IF YOU EMAIL HIM AT DINING@DUBUQUE365.COM.

