

A Vermont dining experience worth repeating

By Kathryn Reed

WOODSTOCK, Vt. – As a vegetarian, I have a few simple ways to rate a good menu. No. 1, there is something on it I will eat. No. 2, the choices are not a veggie burger (unless it's a burger joint or something like that) or a portabella sandwich. Growing in importance is No. 3, using local ingredients.

The Woodstock Inn's Red Rooster restaurant did not disappoint. As the main restaurant in the upscale Vermont inn, the food was fantastic, the prices reasonable and the service lacking.

The spacious dining room had more booths than traditional tables. The lighting was dim, but not so terrible the menu couldn't be read. The only criticism of the night was our absent waitress. We let her know our displeasure with our tip.



Saffron
Toasted
Israeli
Couscous

The Saffron Toasted Israeli Couscous (\$19) was outrageously delicious. It nearly pained me to give up a bite to let Sue try it.

"We have a lot of fun in the kitchen," chef Jason Lawless

said.

It shows in the food.

I started the night with a bowl of Sweet Potato and Apple Bisque (\$8). It was a tad bit in the sweet side, but oh so flavorful. It made me wonder what type of apple was used.

Sue had the soup special, which was potato bacon. She liked it, saying it's rare for the bacon flavor to be so distinct.

At the last-minute Sue switched her entrée choice from scallops to prime rib (\$25). Based on there not being a morsel of meat left on the plate, she clearly was not disappointed in her selection.

Listed on the menu are the various local food suppliers. Eleven of the 12 were from Vermont, with one from Massachusetts.

Chef Lawless has been the master in the kitchen since July 2008, when he moved to the Green Mountain state after working in New York City for seven years.

"It's definitely a change of pace with seasonal ups and downs. We rely on our golf and ski seasons," Lawless said. He said the middle seasons – what Tahoe folk would call shoulder season – are hard to get used to. It means going from preparing 300 meals a night in peak season to 30 in the slow times.



Sweet Potato
and Apple

Bisque

One dish that is a favorite no matter the season, Lawless said, is the Seafood Stew. (Recipe below.)

“It’s really easy for the home cook to make. It’s not an elaborate recipe,” Lawless said.

He also said it has a real Vermont feel. The comments in the recipe are all from Lawless. I have not tried it.

Seafood Soup (Serves 2)

1 leek, small dice

1 bulb fennel, small dice

1 medium onion, small dice

4 cloves garlic, sliced thin

1 T chopped ginger

1 tsp saffron

1 tsp old bay

$\frac{1}{4}$ tsp cayenne pepper

$\frac{1}{2}$ C Pernod

1 C white wine

1 can clam juice, 16 oz

1 8 oz can diced tomatoes

1 C water

$\frac{1}{4}$ pound butter

Salt to taste

In a large pot, melt the butter over medium heat. Add the onion, fennel, and leeks, a pinch of salt, and sweat until they become tender, about 10 minutes. Add the garlic and ginger, and cook another 5 minutes. Deglaze with the white wine and Pernod and reduce by half. Add the remaining ingredients and simmer until the vegetables are soft and the tomatoes have broken down, about 90 minutes. You can finish the soup with any kind of seafood or shellfish that you would like. I like to use PEI mussels, shrimp, salmon, and cod. Just add the seafood to the finished soup in the pot and simmer until all the seafood is cooked.

I like to serve it with grilled sourdough bread and **saffron aioli**.

Tiny pinch saffron threads, about 20 strands

1½ T warm water

2 large egg yolks

1 large clove garlic, minced

¼ tsp salt

¾ C extra-virgin olive oil

2 teaspoons fresh lemon juice

Freshly ground black pepper

In a small bowl, soak the saffron threads in the warm water for 20 minutes. In a deep bowl, combine the egg yolks, garlic, and salt, and whisk to combine. Very slowly, dribble in the olive oil, whisking all the time. You can add the oil a bit more quickly after about half has been absorbed, but go very slowly at first or the mayonnaise may “break.”

Add the saffron and its soaking water, then use the lemon juice to swirl around in the saffron-soaking bowl to catch any

remaining saffron essence. Whisk the lemon juice into the aioli. Add a few grinds of pepper. The aioli should be made at least 4 hours before using, and will keep, refrigerated, for up to 48 hours.