

TASTE

DINING OUT by Rachel Forrest

A creative twist

Christopher's, great food at super prices

"This strawberry butter certainly has a creative twist," exclaimed Organic Farmer Andy as he bit into a slice of hot bread slathered with pink butter. Ah, I thought, one of the current ubiquitous local restaurant buzzwords has become a part of his vernacular, but no, it's actually a part of the tagline for Christopher's Third Street Grille, a subdued spot right in downtown Dover with a neighborhood feel and "steak, seafood & spirits (you guessed it) with a creative twist."

And it's actually quite true, because while the menu has all the major elements you need to please anyone — the steaks, the pasta, the chowder and the seafood — and while some are pretty plain and basic, but very well prepared, many of the dishes do have the creative element we need to keep us coming back.

The large open dining room is spare in décor but warm in woods, a little dark, but not gloomy and the staff is certainly sunny as heck, all young and cute and happy. There's a bar area where on Thursday nights a guitarist plays and there's a TV there, especially important in this frenzy of baseball playoff games. I was informed that OFA might need to check the score at some point.

We started with a few cocktails, a margarita and my Long Island Iced Tea (hello, Jersey shore, circa 1981), which were good. The wine list is very small here but the beer list is mightier with both draft and bottled, domestic and exotic.

Appetizers run the gamut of the usual elements but indeed with that creative twist — calamari with marinara sauce, but also Rhode Island style, which means tossed with garlic butter and peperoncini, or simple bacon-wrapped scallops, but here with a fresh fruit chutney. We started

with an appetizer special, marinated artichoke hearts baked with a mix of gooey cheeses (\$7). I like this because it was not the usual mess of mashed-up artichokes mixed with Boursin cheese, but firm hearts with fresh chewy cheese.

CHRISTOPHER'S THIRD STREET GRILLE

16 Third St., Dover, 740-7444
HOURS Lunch 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Monday-Saturday.
Dinner Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, 4:30-9 p.m.,
Friday and Saturday until 10 p.m., Sunday noon-9 p.m.
Closed Tuesday.

FOOD ★★★★★. Expertly prepared dishes that give you the basics but also some, ahem, creative twists that don't go awry.

SERVICE ★★★ and a half. Charming and enthusiastic.

AMBIENCE ★★★ and a half. Simple, sparse décor but with a warmth from the crowd.

OVERALL ★★★ and a half. Relaxed, fun spot with terrific food that doesn't go overboard and those prices — worth a trip.

★★★★★ Excellent

Crab cakes were also very good, crisp on the top and bottom and served with a fresh tomato relish and a red pepper aioli. There was plenty of crab meat as well at a very good price (\$7).

Organic Farmer Andy also tried a bowl of chicken noodle soup, one of the best I've had in a while. While it's just plain soup, the broth is rich and the chicken is all white meat with a good flavor as a whole (\$3).

There was a trout special that looked promising, a pecan crusted steelhead with apple shallot butter, but after ordering, our waitress told us they had sold the last one. She offered a rainbow trout in its place but OFA decided on the New

England sea scallops instead, two large skewers of grilled scallops, pure white and sweet with a lemon herb butter (\$16). It's a good example of how chef/owner Christopher Lund can take

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the simple and keep it delicious by cooking it just right and not mucking it up with silliness.

On the other hand, the house specialties go a little further with that whole creative twist thing in dishes like pan seared sea scallops with a creamy pesto sauce or Atlantic salmon with black bean rice and pico de gallo. The baked potato with the scallops was also good, but the grilled asparagus lacked flavor and they're out of season.

Steaks are important on this menu with six different preparations. I love prime rib and here it's slow-roasted in house and offered in two sizes, a 10 oz. for \$13 and the 16 oz. for \$18, both incredibly good deals. Yikes, a 12 oz. top sirloin is only \$15!

My prime rib was terrific with a subtle seasoning and a touch of garlic infused into the meat. It really was one of the best I've had in a while with a creamy horseradish sauce or an au jus to pour all over it. My hand-cut sweet potato fries were thick and crispy. I also dipped them into the horseradish sauce.

Desserts are also simple, but good. A key lime pie was refreshingly very tart (\$5) and the warm chocolate pudding cake was a large circle of smooth and soft dark chocolate cake with a gooey chocolate coating all nice and hot (\$6).

Christopher's has a great neighborhood vibe just off the main drag of Dover where many regulars and newbies come for the bar scene and to dive into some very good dishes, some with that — yes — creative twist, but many just great food, expertly prepared. With no entrée over \$21, the wallet is just as satisfied as the palate.

Rachel Forrest is a former restaurant owner who lives in Portsmouth. Her column appears Wednesdays in *Go & Do*. Her restaurant review column, *Dining Out*, appears Thursdays in *Spotlight* magazine. Hear her on *Wine Me Dine Me* with co-host Susan Tuveson at 6 p.m. Fridays on WSCA-FM 106.1. She can be reached by e-mail at rforrest@seacoastonline.com.

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