

Fresh menu at Timmer's Resort honors tradition



Chicken Wellington (\$18) encases a moist airline breast in earthy mushroom paste and golden puff pastry.

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I did this more than once: walked into Timmer's Resort on Big Cedar Lake outside West Bend, sniffed the air, smiled.

There's nothing quite like the sweet scent of a wood fire - or the sight of an immense fieldstone fireplace in the dining room, flames leaping and popping - on a beastly cold Wisconsin night.

The resort, a landmark on Big Cedar since the 19th century, passed from the Timmer family to philanthropists and lake residents Judi and George Prescott when they bought the property in late 2007, and the Prescotts funded an extensive, historically sensitive renovation that began a year later and wrapped up in May 2009. The results are impressive. And sometime in fall, the menu got an update, too.

I first had stopped in at Timmer's in late summer on a whim, just to try the fish fry. When I idly checked the dinner menu online in late autumn, it was clear that changes had been made; the menu looked fresher and more contemporary, but it honored the resort's traditions to appeal to longtime clientele.

I like what they've done with the place.

The dining room is warm, and not just from the fire. It's paneled in honeyed wood, and on each cloth-covered table a pillar candle flickers inside a hurricane glass. Soundproofing has tamed the noise level since I first dropped in.

At the helm of Timmer's is veteran restaurateur Andy Ruggeri as general manager, and Dean Schmitz as chef; they previously were the team that launched the fine-dining hotel restaurants Andrew's in Delafield and the Black Trumpet in Waukesha.

And while this menu is in many ways simpler than those - hey, you'll even find the best mozzarella wraps around (\$8), smoky and perfect with a drink in the bar - the dishes benefit from Schmitz's considerable fine-dining chops. A deliciousness and expert technique suffuse the food here.

The newest menu - it changed again slightly a month or so ago - lists only five appetizers, and for the most part you'd think of them as pub fare, like those mozzarella sticks. But they're so much better. An artichoke dip (\$9), for example, in Parmesan cream sauce was silky and savory, made all the more interesting with the addition of crisped prosciutto and fresh spinach.

But keeping appetizers minimal is understandable when each entrée comes with warm, buttery-crust bread and soup or a house salad. The salad is a nice little plate of mixed greens with house-made dressings, but Schmitz's soups are must-haves. The standing soup previously was white cheddar whimsically topped with popcorn; currently, it's roast chicken and corn chowder.

Consider, though, the soup of the day, especially when it's as nuanced and delicious as the Hungarian mushroom soup I had one night, spiced with an undercurrent of hot paprika. (Soups also are available a la carte, \$3 a cup or \$4 a bowl.)

Caesar salad (\$7, or \$12 with chicken, \$13 with shrimp) reminded me what a good one should be like: deeply flavorful with a true Caesar dressing, based on anchovy.

Main courses offer something for everyone: meat, fish, poultry, pasta, vegetarian. There was fantastic roast duck (\$24), two legs and thighs with meat as pliable as softened butter and accented with plum-port sauce; chicken Wellington (\$18), a moist airline breast encased in earthy mushroom paste and golden puff pastry; shrimp Alfredo (\$20) so delectable my dining companion nearly forgot about the shrimp, as tasty as they were; perfect ravioli stuffed with mushrooms and bathed in walnut cream sauce (\$18, additional \$6 for chicken or \$7 for shrimp); a 12-ounce rib-eye (\$26) with hearty flavor and the slight chew you'd expect from the cut, with a robust mushroom sauce, roasted fingerling potatoes and the day's vegetable, broccoli.

The sole off-note I encountered was a plate of grilled pork loin chops (\$16) that were cooked through when I would have preferred them to medium doneness. But the server didn't ask, and I didn't offer.

Timmer's also makes several sandwiches for lighter meals or maybe dinner in the bar. I tried a cheeseburger - the half-pound burger now on the menu is topped with the restaurant's barbecue sauce and bacon (\$10) - that was thick and juicy.

Not long ago, Timmer's introduced a menu called country favorites; it will be served every night but Friday through winter - homespun and homey entrées such as meatloaf and braised chicken, priced at no more than \$10.50. Judging from the couple I tried, they're no less delicious. Pot roast pot pie (\$10.50) with a gorgeous browned lid of puff pastry seemed enormous, filled with tender beef, potato, peas, carrot and mushroom in a deeply savory sauce.

Among the dishes I was sorry to see depart from the menu were an entrée - elegant scallop "chowder," composed of a half-dozen perfect, large scallops in cream sauce with julienned vegetables - and a dessert - a smartly presented bananas Foster schaum torte, the rum-scented hot banana sauce served in a small pitcher to pour over the crisp meringue and ice cream.

They were a clear snapshot of the talent at work in the kitchen; I wish I could picture having them again.

The desserts that remain, though, are no slouches. How smart to end the meal on a memorable note, with well-executed house-made desserts such as the crème brûlée (\$7), flawless every time and in uncommon flavors such

as almond, ginger coconut and an amazing, inventive "hot chocolate," the sugar crust covered with a thin layer of marshmallow.

Grasshopper "pie" (\$7), a round base of chocolate-coconut for the crust with minty filling piped atop it and crowned with pure whipped cream, was a delight, too; it recently was replaced with ginger carrot cake.

Coffee at the end of the night could be hit or miss - sometimes weak, sometimes rich. As for other drinks, the five beers on tap in the bar admirably are all Wisconsin craft brews, including a revived West Bend beer (now brewed in Glendale), Lithia Regner Red. The moderately priced wine list printed with the dinner menu is brief but covers the bases; it's to be updated in another month or so.

Considerate, friendly servers sometimes missed a detail here and there - slow to refill water glasses on a busy weekend night, say - but they consistently kept the big picture in mind: sending guests home happy. In my experience, they never failed.

As lovely as Timmer's is in winter, with fireplaces in both the dining room and the bar, I'm longing for the day when the patio overlooking the lake will be open again - I spied it on my first visit and knew I'd like to pass some time there, before I even knew how much potential Timmer's had and how well it would realize it.