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Dining/Bellport

Sure Hand in the Kitchen And a Cozy Fire to Eat By

By JOANNE STARKEY

THE summer crowds drawn to Bellport by Gateway Playhouse and the busy marina have helped turn this charming hamlet into a great restaurant town. Many of the places are open year round, among them Porters on the Lane, which opened in July.

It is in the former Bellport Chowder House, a popular watering hole, and the bar at Porters is still front and center. Nevertheless, the food is so good that this is more restaurant than bar.

Porters occupies the first floor of a rambling Victorian house, with its porch used for dining in warm weather. This time of year, the preferred seating is in the fireplace room, a snug spot beyond the bar, with a large stone fireplace at its heart. The walls and ceiling here are pressed tin painted creamy white. A model sailboat, miniature lighthouses and ships' lanterns adorn the fireplace mantel; the nautical theme is echoed throughout the restaurant.

The main dining room is large, airy and painted navy blue and white, with photographs of local sights dotting the walls.

A meal gets off to a good start with warm slices of crusty bread and a pot of chive butter. The best appetizers are those that show off the skills of the chef, Sean Blakeslee, a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America. He is a veteran of many kitchens, ranging from One if by Land, Two if by Sea in Manhattan to Mazzei's in Blue Point, where he was executive chef and part owner.

The best of the starters we sampled was a serving of steamed littleneck clams paired with slices of chorizo, garlic, thyme, white wine and butter. The sauce was so delicious that everyone at the table wanted to dunk bread in it. Also outstanding was the large lump crab cake served on a base of guacamole with a dab of mango chutney on top and drizzles of chili tartar sauce adorning the plate. A bowl of asiago cheese and porcini mushroom risotto, with an intense woody flavor, also drew raves.

Even though the chef's expertise was not as evident in its preparation, the shrimp cocktail was a winner: a small tin tub of crushed ice strewn with seaweed and containing four jumbos. The wedge salad pleased the diner who ordered it, but it was missing its promised bacon. The Caesar had a Parmesan-peppercorn dressing and was crowned with a long, thin garlic crostini instead of the usual croutons.

A couple of recommended winter treats on the entree list are braised boneless beef short ribs, which were fork tender and nestled on a bed of mashed sweet potatoes, and a four-inch-high grilled pork chop with an apricot-ancho-chili glaze, apple brioche stuffing and honey-glazed brussels sprouts. A serving of day-boat sea scallops surrounding a wild mushroom and asparagus risotto was another winner.

Two specials drew our attention: an 18-ounce, blackened rib-eye steak, which was juicy and flavorful, and pan-seared Chilean sea bass ringed with lobster beurre blanc dotted with big chunks of lobster. That sauce also held unadvertised seedless grapes, which were fine with me but might be off-putting to some diners.

We also tried the juicy burger accompanied by a mountain of thin, crisp fries. The meat was medium rare as ordered, but it came with sautéed mushrooms in stead of the sautéed onions requested.

A dry bread pudding was the only miss among the appealing desserts. Best were the twin profiteroles — house-made cream puffs filled with vanilla bean ice cream and topped with hot fudge sauce — and the individual apple tart served a la mode. An old-fashioned root beer float also made for a fun finale. All the desserts were decorated with big, beautiful fresh berries, just one of the little touches that made the food at Porters memorable.

Summary:

Porters on the Lane
19 Bellport Lane
Bellport, New York
(631) 803-6067
portersonthelane.com

VERY GOOD

THE SPACE: Rambling Victorian house with dining porch (in summer), large main dining room and snug fireplace room. Not wheelchair accessible.

THE CROWD: Casual couples, small groups and some children. (Children's menu, \$9 for most entrees.)

THE BAR: Very active, with some patrons dining at the bar. List of 58 wines by the bottle (\$30 to \$175) and 10 by the glass (\$7 to \$10).

THE BILL: Lunch entrees \$10 to \$24, dinner entrees \$12 (burger) to \$32 (filet mignon). American Express, Visa, MasterCard and Discover are accepted.

WHAT WE LIKE: Shrimp cocktail, steamed littleneck clams, crab cake; mushroom risotto, short ribs, pork chop, sell scallops, burger, Chilean sea bass, blackened rib-eye; apple tart, root beer float, profiteroles.

IF YOU GO: Dinner: Tuesday to Thursday, 5 to 10 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 5 p.m. to 11 p.m.; Sunday, 4 to 10 p.m. Closed Monday. (After Easter the restaurant will resume serving lunch from noon to 4 p.m. daily except Monday.)

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