

The Star-Ledger

Gladstone Tavern is a winner: Just ask the crowds

Sunday, July 23, 2006

By **Cody Kendall** for the Star-Ledger

Gladstone Tavern

273 Main St., Gladstone. Dinner: 5-10 p.m. Mondays-Sundays. Full bar. Major credit cards. Casual dress. Wheelchair accessible. Reservations only for parties of eight or more. (908) 234-9055.

* * *

It was as if the hordes of people who descended on the Gladstone Tavern last month had been waiting, mouths watering, to pounce the minute the doors opened.

Formerly known as the Brass Penny and most recently as Chatfields, the majestically columned 19th-century building with the welcoming front porch had been shuttered and fallen into sad disrepair over the past 4 1/2 years.

But all the folks who used to gather at the hostelry must not have found anything to replace it in their lives. There were instant lines outside the beautifully refurbished building, with 40-minute waits for a table not uncommon.

But I'll bet most of those who hung out at the establishment in the past didn't recognize the place once they got inside. The old center hallway is gone, the bar is located where a dining room used to be and the whole dining area has a more open, airy and sophisticated look than it did under the old floor plan.

Booths are separated by open window frames, an attractive touch. Frankly, though, I'd rather see something soundproof installed in those "windows" to cut down on the noise. It can be intense when the place is crowded, which seems to be most of the time. If you're looking for a spot that's a little quieter, there's an outdoor dining area along one side of the building, and tables on the porch.

The food is straightforward regional American, from fall-off-the-bone wine-braised short ribs (\$22) to the Southern comfort of wild mushroom grits (\$10) and robust New England corn chowder (\$6). Fire-grilled selections of meat, fish and fowl are basted with herbs from the restaurant's garden and there also are a good number of salads. Their ranks include chopped vegetables (\$10) with a goat cheese fritter and a refreshing new twist on an old favorite, a lobster Cobb salad (\$28) with green beans, avocado, tomato and blue cheese.

Among the specialties are crispy half duck (\$25) sweetened by a hint of maple, steak au poivre (\$28) with addictive hand-cut fries and surf and turf (\$34), a lobster/filet mignon combo with creamed spinach.

When chef/owner Tom Carlin worked at the old Rudolfo's down the street during the 1990s, he thought Chatfields wasn't realizing its potential. Carlin, whose credits include a stint at the Gotham Bar and Grill in New York City and the late lamented 40 Main St. in Millburn, knew exactly what he wanted to do with the tavern's food. His concept is to "take quality ingredients and not do too much to them; put the product first, not overcomplicate it with cooking techniques."

Everything is made in-house, from the soups to the ice cream, and it's served to a varied clientele. You'll see attractive young people gravitating to the bar before sitting down to dine, if they ever do; families (the children's menu offers the likes of hot dogs, burgers and chicken fingers for \$6) and well-dressed, well-heeled Somerset Hills residents back at their old stomping grounds. They're all welcomed by Sir Pennysworth, the life-sized statue of a horse that has stood on the porch for decades.

Service is consistent for such a new enterprise, and to management's credit, it offered a 10 percent discount on food while "protocols and procedures" were fine-tuned.

The wine list includes a respectable selection by the glass as well as by the bottle. House wines are \$6 a glass and from there you can try the Monkey Bay Sauvignon Blanc (\$9/glass, \$34/bottle), the Parker Station Pinot Noir (\$9/\$34) or the XY Zinfandel (\$10/\$36).

Desserts get some extra juice from that ice cream produced in-house. There's dark rum accompanying the pecan tart (\$8), fresh mint with the flourless chocolate cake (\$8) and cinnamon as a contrast to the indulgent warm apple waffle (\$8) draped in maple sauce. My favorite, though, was the strawberry ice cream short cake (\$7), sweet, fruity and airy as dandelion fluff.

Later in the summer, plans call for the tavern to open for lunch, and I'd be willing to bet it will be as popular at noon as it is at night. I just wish it took reservations for smaller groups. If you feel your time is too valuable to waste waiting around for a table, better come early or on a weeknight.

When we visited, the bar was so crowded we couldn't shoehorn our way in, so we hung out on the porch before we were seated. Restaurants can get burned if people who reserve don't show up, but the tavern shouldn't have any problem with that because someone is always coming through the door.

It's easy to see why the Gladstone Tavern is drawing a crowd. The place is fun and the food fits the bill for those who prefer straightforward food over fussy cooking. Coupled with the accommodating service, it's easy to see why this restaurant was a winner right out of the gate. ■