



GLADSTONE TAVERN

WE DID. IT IS. WE ARE.

Article by C.G. Wolfe • Photos by Tracie Van Auken, courtesy of Gladstone Tavern

My mother and stepdad had ventured down from the Nutmeg State to celebrate a couple of birthdays with us. To unwind after their long drive, and to get the party started, we decided to drop-in on owner/chef Tom Carlin and his crew at the Gladstone Tavern. Thoughtful and serene (at least when he's away from the kitchen), not many of Carlin's patrons would peg him as the former drummer of a college punk band, who was a Sex Pistols fan when he got his first cooking gig in high school, at Don's Drive-in, a "from-scratch" burger place that was legendary in the Livingston, New Jersey area. After receiving a B.A. in Fine Arts, Carlin eschewed a slot at the Culinary Institute of America to hone his craft in some of New York City's most innovative and demanding kitchens, including Jams, Gotham Bar & Grill, Mondrian, and the much-lauded Quilted Giraffe, often at the behest of his friend and colleague, celebrity-chef Tom Colicchio. Carlin started out with Colicchio at 40 Main Street, a former three-and-a-half star restaurant in Millburn. "Back then we were just in our early 20s, cooking," Carlin recalled, "but he's a bright guy and he's a motivated guy and he was the one that said 'we're too close to New York to be working in New Jersey.'" Carlin "hop-scotched" with Colicchio across the Hudson and spent the next decade working alongside him and other chefs he admired, such as Jonathan Waxman, who is credited with



Mixologist, Robby Seibert on the sax.

bringing California cuisine to New York, and Alfred Portale, a pioneer in the New American cuisine movement that arose from Alice Waters' original fusion-style, farm-to-table cooking.

When his kids reached school age, Carlin, who was living in Jersey City and commuting to Manhattan, decided to move to the suburbs. "My kids would have been eaten alive in Jersey City," he quipped. He became the chef at Rudolfo's in Peapack Gladstone, where he received an "Excellence" rating from *The New York Times*. After a long night in the kitchen, Carlin would pop over to nearby Chatfields to unwind. "I loved the feel of the location," Carlin said of the once wildly popular bar and grill. So when Chatfield's closed and eventually went up for sale, Carlin, with the backing of a friend who was willing to invest in him, bought the property in 2005, and completely renovated the 160-year old building. The results were a stunning improvement that stayed true to the historic integrity of the structure, but not everything was new. Sir Pennysworth, a life-sized horse statue that has adorned the restaurant since its storied days as the



Chef /Owner Tom Carlin

"Brass Penny," kept his position on the front porch, where he's been greeting diners for over three decades.

From its inception, Gladstone tavern has been a fun place. Radiating with what my Mom calls "upscale-hometown ambience," the former farmstead, hotel, and rural speakeasy is a favorite haunt in the Somerset Hills and the kind of establish-

ment where even a Brooklyn ex-pat, like my stepdad, feels like a local. And if it seems like everyone knows each other at the Gladstone Tavern, it's because everybody comes here. Carlin has captured the local market in a big way and is casting his net ever wider as more folks discover the eatery's "living room" appeal. But what really keeps them coming back is Chef Carlin's modern take on American comfort food; original and creative yet familiar and accessible, always fresh, and everything from the bread to the desserts made from scratch. It's food the way mom would have made it, if mom had spent ten years training with some of the top chefs and restaurateurs in the country.

"I love coming to work because it's my playground," said Carlin. "I like to cook and I like to hire people who like to cook and obviously that differentiates our product from others. We do it our own way and people can taste it. It's much healthier. There are no additives, harmful ingredients, or crazy amounts of salt, sugar and fat. A lot of people are like 'I'm gluten free can I eat this...?' We don't use thickeners. There's no flour in any of our sauces. It takes a lot of labor but making



Diners enjoying the relaxed atmosphere at Gladstone Tavern

things from scratch, that's what sets us apart."

Carlin creates all of his menus, which change with the seasons and take advantage of what is available at local farm markets, like Melick's in Oldwick, which is one of their staple sources for fresh fruit and produce. Within his seasonal menus are theme weeks, such as Peach Week, Corn Conny Week, Apple Week, and Pumpkin Week, one of my favorites, which features Carlin's award-winning Pumpkin Chili, made with local pumpkin, house smoked pork, kidney beans, and fresh chili, topped with queso fresco, and served with house-made tortilla.

"It's crazy the amount of menus I have to keep coming up with," Carlin admitted. "It's almost impossible but we get it done. It keeps us fresh and coming up with new ideas."

Oftentimes something featured during a theme week proves so popular that it becomes a regular menu item. During one Cinco de Maya Week, Carlin offered a guacamole, made to order (spicy or mild) and served in an avocado shell with warm tortilla chips. It's since become the most popular appetizer at the tavern along with his trademark Crab Tots, which Carlin came up with while watching the famous tater tot scene from Napoleon Dynamite with his family ("Napoleon, give me some of your tots").

"My kids were really into that movie," said Carlin. "That's where I got the idea of making miniature crab cakes and calling them crab tots."

My family have become "out-of-state" regulars at Gladstone tavern and ten years later the experience has morphed into a tradition. After a short wait at the bar, where mixologist Robby Seibert stays true to the tavern's spirit by making everything from the tonic to the grenadine in-house, the host put two tables together for us by the fire. Crab Tots and Guacamole (spicy) were a unanimous request for the table, but Mom decided she also wanted to try the Bavarian Flatbread, made with local



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kielbasa and house sauerkraut, on a salt pretzel crust, topped with a mustard-ale béchamel. It was a great choice that paired really nicely with the Robby Seibert's Backwoods Moonshine; Michter's bourbon, Laird's Applejack, cider and cinnamon - happy Oktoberfest! My wife added the Roasted Red & Gold Beet Salad, with charred Brussel leaf, smoked almond, sweet gorgonzola, and a carrot curry vinaigrette - ditto all around.

James Brown had just finished telling us that it was "a man's world" and Thelonious Monk was beginning to tease the ivories when my daughter scraped the last bit of "guac" from the avocado shell and popped the last tot. Like every detail at the tavern, Carlin, a passionate music lover, selects each song on the playlists. When we interviewed him, he told us that he's the type of person who is more comfortable in the kitchen than sitting down and engaging in a long conversation (like the one we were having), but we discovered that if you mention Muscle Shoals or Stacks Records, he's apt to stay put for a while and let someone else do the cooking.

We had just enough time to order another round before the entrees came. In keeping with Carlin's style, the plating was clean and colorful. "If all the ingredients are created properly it's going to look good," he had told us. My daughter, who has graduated from the kid's menu, ordered from the small plates and opted for the Pumpkin Gnocchi, and enjoyed the "nice little crunch" from the toasted pepita. Of course, she added a side of fries (she graduated from the kid's menu, not culinary school). My wife went for the Grilled Salmon served with a beet emulsion, roasted maitake, wilted spinach and truffled celery root puree, while Mom ordered the Beef Short Rib "Chop" and let me eat half of her horseradish whipped potatoes (that's why I love you Mom.) Chef Carlin loves to cook duck and his Crisp Duck Confit is a signature dish at the tavern and now one of my step-



dad's favorites (he cleaned the plate). Being a creature of habit, I had to have the Iron Skillet Chicken with thyme pan au jus and roasted autumn vegetables. Carlin has been cooking some variation of this simple but always consistent dish for 30 years.

"I started doing it for Jonathan Waxman at Jams," said Carlin. Everybody likes a roast chicken but usually when you get it in a restaurant it's bad because they cook it ahead of time, it's dry and rubbery. It's not a secret technique, it's the

way we bone-out a chicken and of course the quality of the chicken. We marinate it and we cook it in a cast iron skillet, we get it really hot and cook it the whole time skin side down so it gets crispy. It basically comes right out of the oven and on to a plate because it takes about 25 minutes, people want their food by that time, so as soon as it's done it's on a plate it's going out, it's always hot, it's crispy, it's moist."

An espresso was obligatory if I was going to get up from the table but we skipped dessert because my Mom had brought



down my favorite cake that she has made for me since I was a kid; banana with coffee icing (a whole other article). But in every other case where your mom hasn't

baked you a special birthday cake - stay for the dessert! Again, everything from the sauces to the house-churned ice cream are made from scratch. If I had stayed, it

would've been a toss-up between the pumpkin cake rolled around a cream cheese mousse served with white chocolate sauce, toasted pepita and cranberry or the S'more cake, a flourless torte with marshmallow icing, smoky fudge sauce, hazelnut twigs, and graham "dust." Actually, who am I kidding, I would've ordered both.

When asked what he wants his patrons to say about Gladstone Tavern after their dining experience, Chef Carlin responded, "I came to the right place, the food's great, the atmosphere is warm, I'm comfortable here, and I'm now a regular." We did. It is. We are.

Gladstone Tavern is located at 273 Main Street, in Gladstone, NJ. For reservations call: (908) 234-9055. To learn more and browse their menus, visit www.gladstonetavern.com.



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