

You needn't check into hotel to check out very fine dining

BY JOHN KEENAN

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Making a hotel restaurant into a destination spot is challenging - especially for the hotels near the Old Market because they compete with that district's stellar dining establishments.



Chef Glenn Wheeler displays, from left, a chocolate fondue, a grilled rack of lamb and a grilled asparagus appetizer, three of the dishes he's created for the Hilton's new

But with delicious meals, eye-catching presentation, fine service and prices comparable to Omaha's high-end restaurants, the Liberty Tavern at the new Hilton Omaha stacks up to the city's best dining.

Chef Glenn Wheeler, formerly of the Passport, Omaha Prime, Bomba Dia and Wheelers, put his stamp on the restaurant.

Fans will recognize Wheeler's seafood pot pie. And he prepares the Iowa cut pork chop entree the same way he's done in the past - stuffed with Maytag bleu cheese and apple-fennel cream.

There are new dishes: a salmon dish with a Dijon-rye crust, sautéed cabbage and a horseradish aioli that Wheeler describes as "sort of my takeoff on the pastrami sandwich."

Steak choices include a strip steak, filet mignon, a bone-in ribeye, top sirloin and a porterhouse. The wine list offers 220 selections.

Liberty Tavern

Where: Hilton Omaha, 1001 Cass St.

Hours: 6 a.m. to 11 a.m. breakfast; 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. lunch; limited bar menu 2 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.; dinner 5:30 p.m. to 10 p.m.; limited bar menu 10 p.m. to 1 a.m.

Prices: Appetizers \$7.50 to \$11; entrees \$13.50 to \$35, "market price" for rock lobster

Alcohol: Full bar, extensive wine list

Payment: Credit cards,

Wheelchair accessible: Yes

Smoking section: In bar

Information: 998-4321

Our Monday night meal was a treat. The service was prompt, courteous and mannered. The waiters served our plates from the left and cleared them from the right in a fashion that would make Miss Manners proud.

The meal got off to a promising start - the bread basket contained a warm, multi-grain bread and a delicious, airy ciabatta bread.

Wheeler had a little fun designing the grilled asparagus appetizer (\$7.50). The six spears were stacked in a tic-tac-toe pattern with squirts of yellow truffle aioli creating the X's and O's.

The winner? The customer, because the slightly charred vegetable and garlic-herb marinade are a perfect match. The accompanying warm polenta cake added to the appetizer.

The mouth-watering smoked tomato-tarragon sauce supplied with the lobster cakes (\$9.50) made the appetizer exceptional. The cakes were breaded and crisp on the outside, moist and warm on the inside.

The seafood pot pie (\$22) is a creamy mixture of seafood and vegetables served steaming hot in a shallow, cast-iron bowl. A deliciously rich sherry cream sauce covered the fish, carrots, peas and diced red potatoes. A large, puffed pastry topped the dish and soaked up the thick seafood broth.

One of the restaurant's most popular dishes is the meatloaf (\$15), served with a bourbon-shallot gravy alongside asiago mashed potatoes and crisply fried onion twists. It's the top seller on the extensive lunch menu, which includes sandwiches, salads, pizzas entrees and desserts.

The meatloaf makes for a hearty dinner entree. Celery, carrot, onion, garlic, black pepper and salt, among other things, flavor the dish.

The chocolate fondue (\$8) arrived above a flame and with strawberry and banana slices and cinnamon-flavored pound cake cubes. The imported Belgian chocolate was fudge-like, not too sweet, with a slight orange flavor from a touch of Grand Marnier orange liqueur.

The total for the meal, which included two appetizers, two entrees, a dessert and an \$8 glass of Niebaum-Coppola "Diamond Series" cabernet-claret, was \$77.55 before tip.

Wheeler said he wants to compete with any restaurant in town. The Liberty Tavern is more than ready to face the competition.

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