

Baltimore Sun

Peter's Inn knows gourmet comfort food

By Elizabeth Large | January 11, 2009

I last ate at Peter's Inn in 1993. It was still calling itself a biker's bar, although maybe with a wink, and I described the food as "home-cooked with a little pizzazz."

A couple of years later, Bud Tiffany and his wife, Karin, who was working in the kitchen at the time, bought the place from owner Peter Denzer. They've made a few changes, to say the least, although not so much in the bar itself.

The place still has its biker-bar charm, but it's a very cleaned-up version. (Is there such a thing as biker-bar chic? Or a charming biker bar?) It's cozy and small, with lots of dark old wood and white-clothed tables wedged into every nook and cranny. Even so, there are only 37 seats if you count the bar. A sign announcing "The kitchen is open" is lit in back.

The New American menu, which changes weekly, has dishes like "duck leg confit over a frisee salad with fingerling potatoes and a fried quail egg" and there's not a Buffalo wing or nacho in sight. (To be fair, there's also always a steak with mashed potatoes, vegetable and "100 percent butter.")

Peter's has been discovered, so if you want one of the eight tables, I was told, you have to get there early. The kitchen opens at 6:30 p.m., and that's when we arrived. Unfortunately, everyone else had arrived earlier. They were drinking a beer or wine ordered from the moderately priced, eclectic wine list, happy that they had come early enough to snag a table, and waiting until the kitchen opened to order. I guess early means 6 p.m.

We ended up sitting at the bar, where there was only one other patron. The bartender folded cloth napkins in half and put them in front of us as place mats, and Bud Tiffany stood at the end of the bar, chatting with us, drinking a Bud, and making up a list he labeled "How Long the Wait Be." Later, regulars came in and put their names on it, waiting for a table to turn over.

My advice is don't bother to wait; we were perfectly happy at the bar. Peter's is that friendly kind of place where the bartender takes the time to discuss the '50s rock 'n' roll on the sound system or the pinot grigio he's pouring.

In general, the food at Peter's Inn falls into what well may be the hottest category in the business these days: gourmet comfort food. For instance, the one soup, in fact the one first course of any kind except a salad, was a bowl of French onion soup. Unlike traditional versions, this was made with braised short ribs, so it was quite meaty. Instead of the usual thick, gooey cheese crust, there was a lovely crouton made of French bread and covered with melted Gruyere. It would have been just about perfect if it hadn't been oversalted.

If you want a salad, you order the "salad and garlic bread." (You can also order the garlic bread on its own.) It's



a simple green salad of romaine lettuce with a mild vinaigrette. The disappointment was the bread, which wasn't the bread that had come with the soup but something soft, white and "Italian." If they would stick it under the broiler with the fresh garlic and butter a little longer until it's crusty, then they would have something worth shouting about.

Like I said, the menu changes weekly. It's posted on the Web site, but you have to allow the chef some creative license. For instance, the braised cabbage with the salmon turned out to be fresh spinach with cabbage on top, an interesting variation that might occur because someone thought they would make a great pairing, but also might occur because the kitchen was running low on braised cabbage when we ordered.

The salmon was one of three seafood dishes on the menu, which was made up of seven entrees in all. None of them was vegetarian that week, although Tiffany told me there often is a vegetarian offering and if there isn't, his wife is happy to come up with one if she gets a request.

Meat lovers have plenty to choose from. Three Australian rib lamb chops, good to begin with and made even better by their rich bordelaise sauce, were as fine as you'll get at restaurants where the price would be double. Mashed potatoes finished the plate, which was at once homey comfort food and haute cuisine.

The chef's osso buco was memorable, the dark, flavorful sauce offering hints of garlic, parsley and lemon. With it came a complex mushroom risotto. It was fine, but a plain rice or pasta would have been an even better accompaniment to soak up the heady sauce.

At some bars that serve food, the cooking can be great but the presentation not much of a priority. At Peter's, a fat salmon fillet came arranged with sweet little neck clams in their shells and a buttery sauce. With the spinach-cabbage mix it made for a very pretty plate.

Dessert was pots de creme with fresh strawberries that evening, but the fresh strawberries were missing. (A good thing, to my mind, in the dead of winter.) The rich chocolate custard, made from some fine gourmet chocolate, was stunning, and I loved its pairing with a delicate bit of coffee ice cream. The berry coulis looked pretty, but was more frill than necessity.

The recession may be hurting some restaurants, but Peter's Inn doesn't seem to be one of them. It's the kind of place Baltimoreans love: unpretentious, cozy and personal, with good food at good prices. And don't forget quirky. If Peter's Inn didn't exist in Fells Point, it would be necessary to invent it in Hampden.

peter's inn

Address: 504 S. Ann St., Fells Point

Hours: Open for dinner Tuesday through Saturday

Prices: Most entrees under \$20

Contact: 410-675-7313, petersinn.com

Food: ***

Service: ***

Atmosphere: ***

[Outstanding: **** Good: *** Fair or uneven: ** Poor: *]