



j wilkinson said on May, 31, 2010 at 9:17am

Easily my favorite place to eat in the area. Great food, friendly staff and Andy and Alison make you feel like they have invited you into their home. Highly recommended.

As seen on the web at: www.rochestercitynewspaper.com/restaurants/articles/2010/05/RESTAURANT-REVIEW-Rabbit-Room

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RESTAURANT REVIEW: The Rabbit Room

By James Leach on May 26, 2010

"I don't think you'll like this salad," my dining companion said, as she crooked her arm protectively around her plate of roasted beet and chevre salad and effortlessly parried my fork with her own. "Well," I snapped back, "I don't think you'll like my soup, either," distracting her momentarily while I stole a delicious-looking clump of candied walnuts from her unprotected plate.

Dinner at the The Rabbit Room in Honeoye Falls, I discovered recently, can bring out the worst in a person: although you are normally nice, normally inclined to share bites of your salad, or spoonfuls of soup, Chef Andrew Penner's dishes are so darned good you may well forget the manners you learned in kindergarten, turning your meal into a Hobbesian war of all against all.

Described by the chef as homey and eclectic, the 4-year-old The Rabbit Room is many things to many people. During the week, the restaurant serves top-notch diner fare for lunch. On Thursday nights - and only on Thursday nights - Chef Penner produces an innovative take on contemporary American standards, using fresh, local ingredients in accord with his own "hundred-mile rule" (if it isn't sourced within 100 miles of his restaurant, he likely won't use an ingredient on his menu). The rest of the week, the The Rabbit Room is one of the hottest venues around for weddings, rehearsal dinners, parties, and even a bar mitzvah or two.

Set in a renovated grist mill just above the Honeoye Creek, the The Rabbit Room could have been awful, an overdone faux historical tourist trap. But Penner and his wife, Allison, had the good sense and good taste to let the building speak for itself, leaving the 100-year-old floors bare and the rough stone walls basically unadorned. The dining room during the day is light and airy and full of sunshine. By night it is the very definition of a romantic retreat - dark and intimate without a single distraction from the beauty of your dining companion, and the excellence of Chef Penner's food.

I have to admit that my first visit to the The Rabbit Room for lunch threw me off my stride. Mentally prepared for a tasting menu, I was instead presented with a menu full of sandwiches, soups, and salads. I was a little nonplussed, but the setting was nice, and there was Brooklyn Local 1 - a sensationally good abbey ale brewed in Utica for Brooklyn Brewery - on the restaurant's small but very well selected beer list, so I suspended my skepticism for a bit and ordered a bowl of onion soup and a burger. Penner's onion soup (\$4 cup, \$5 crock) is wonderful. Built on a base of very good, very rich beef stock enriched with plentiful caramelized onions and a splash of what was probably cognac rather than the usual sherry to round out the flavors, it was so tasty that the provolone cheese on top was almost an obstacle keeping me from getting at another spoonful of soup.

Penner's burger (\$10), made with ground beef from Seven Bridges Farm in Lima, was equally good - cooked a juicy medium rare, topped with a generous dollop of bleu cheese-shallot dip, and served on a roll somewhere between a brioche and a typical sandwich roll. The only disappointment was the shriveled tomato served on the side. Fortunately, it wasn't on the burger, and easily disposed of so that I could devote my attention to the luscious combination of pungent bleu cheese and meat juices running down my fingers after the first bite.

I didn't hold out much hope for the chicken satay salad (\$9), anticipating a dry breast atop the usual mesclun mix. Again, the chef surprised me. The chicken was moist and tender, dressed with a zippy peanut sauce that accented the char on the meat. The greens were very fresh and very young, their flavors distinct rather than drowned in dressing.

As good as lunch is, dinner is where Chef Penner really shines. The food he makes is technically perfect, beautifully presented, and a joy to eat. Unlike the usual Italian restaurant gnocchi, Chef Penner's are tiny, not much bigger than the eraser on a fat pencil, and sauteed rather than boiled, giving them a savory crust which holds in a creamy puree of potatoes and butter in what tastes like a 1-1 ratio. Sauteed in butter with cherry tomatoes, scallions, and a handful of finely chopped local mushrooms, the dish is bursting with bright flavors, acids, and fats perfectly balanced. It almost doesn't need the finishing swirl of truffle oil, but you'll be glad the chef added it anyway (\$10 appetizer, \$19 entree).

Roasted beet salad with goat cheese (\$9) is a staple of restaurant menus everywhere, but Chef Penner's stands apart. I don't like beets, but I would go back and order this salad and clean the plate. I do not know what Penner does to his beets, but they are toothsome, flavorful, and almost candy sweet. Complemented by generous dollops of soft goat cheese and walnuts that Penner candies himself, the bitter fight over this salad could end your marriage.

If you order Penner's spring pea soup (\$4 cup, \$5 bowl) you'll at least have some leverage to use in getting some of the beet salad, if you can bear to part with a spoonful. Bright green, finished with a drizzle of good olive oil and a few pine nuts, this has always been one of my favorite spring soups, and Penner's is an excellent interpretation, smooth and creamy with the cool green flavor of spring in every bite.

The most interesting entree is also one I'd usually shy away from, not being a fan of salmon. Penner's salmon duo (\$21), though, changed my tune. Two different kinds of salmon, a thickish slice of Scottish smoked salmon and a medium to medium-rare cooked salmon steak, are stacked one atop the other and perched on a bed of sauteed arugula, roasted vegetables, and large-pearl Israeli couscous, making for a colorful and pretty presentation.

The two kinds of salmon work particularly well together, the salt and the peat smoke in the Scotch salmon adding a welcome savor to the larger salmon fillet without adding any appreciable fishiness to that remarkably fresh-tasting piece of fish. Pairing the meaty salmon with the fun texture of Israeli couscous is inspired, and adding the peppery bite and deep green taste of arugula to the dish brings both color and agreeably deep flavor to the dish.

Try, if you can, to save room for dessert..

The Rabbit Room

61 N Main St, Honeoye Falls

585.582.1830 www.thelowermill.com

Lunch Thu-Sat 11:30 a.m.2 p.m., Thursday Dinner with live music 5:30-9 p.m. (Reservations recommended)



The roasted beet salad.
PHOTO BY JEFF MARINI



The Spring Pea Soup.
PHOTO BY JEFF MARINI



Parisian Gnocchi.
PHOTO BY JEFF MARINI