

## Rocky Hill Inn

### An historic inn is infused with refined and innovative cuisine

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By Antoinette Buckley



SOMETIMES the best way to view a town is by taking a look at its post office. In Rocky Hill, residents still go to the post office to pick up their mail, where friendly exchanges ensue. This helps build a community. The same is true of the historic Rocky Hill Inn, situated just across the street.

It's nice to see the Rocky Hill Inn come back to its roots after a brief affair with a Tex-Mex joint. A traditionally outfitted dining room buttressed against a pub-style hangout is the combination that feels like home here on a corner in historic Rocky Hill. Since 1745 when the first tavern license was issued, the Rocky Hill Inn has been a center for people of the community to gather and exchange thoughts, ideas and merriment. During the Victorian era up until World War II, the inn functioned as a hotel as well.

Husband-and-wife team Evan and Maria Blomgren opened the restaurant a little more than three months ago after a quick period of renovations that focused on bringing the restaurant back to a place in which its aged structure could be admired.

Along with reverence for the building, Mr. Blomgren brings years of chef experience from places like Lahiere's in Princeton, Chamber's Walk in Lawrenceville, the Metuchen Inn, and the fondly remembered Church Street Bistro in Lambertville. As a graduate of the French Culinary Institute, Mr. Blomgren probably has foie gras and paté down pat. But here, Mr. Blomgren presents an American menu with a traditional foundation and embellishes it with contemporary flair.

Management feels like family welcoming you to the dining room. Glass bottles that have been in the family for generations adorn two fireplaces while an heirloom roll top desk and humidior make up the hostess station in the hallway that divides the tavern from the more formal dining room. There hang nostalgic sepia prints of the inn in all its varying stages throughout the last few centuries. The Blomgrens have meshed two histories: theirs and the Inn's.

The hostess is all smiles and Ms. Blomgren can often be found chatting effortlessly with customers. The wait staff carries that same warmth too, although service is still somewhat green.

There are two main menus for dinner with an additional bar menu for little bites. Patrons may order from any menu regardless of which room they choose.

The dinner menu presents more refined food and the tavern menu focuses on comfort food taken to the next level. You can still get that classic, sink-your-teeth-into burger (\$13) or the fish and chips (\$16) that the Inn had been noted for in the past. But it's innovations like the shepherds pie (\$20) that show off Mr. Blomgren's elevated style. It is light years beyond the shepherd's pie of old that aimed to reincarnate leftovers. Mr. Blomgren's first-place version is sophisticated, even delicate, as it is made with braised lamb shank, creamy mashed potatoes, and fresh spinach.

While the wine list, partial to the New World, is appropriate in its modest size and manageable scope, it's the beer that seems to get more attention, especially in the tavern. There are 17 beers on tap, highlighting craft beers and local brews. (Flights include three 5-ounce beers of choice for \$9.)

Mr. Blomgren's appealing cooking style is classic with a twist. While his unexpected additions work out to be surprisingly good, there are moments in which his ingenuity can be misread as incongruous. Sweet and savory flavors can come together either harmoniously or overzealously, but modest presentations are always on target.

This is a place where you'll find your favorites and know how you like to order them. Until then, there may be a glitch or two. From the tavern menu, polenta pizza (\$9) is a bit of a stretch. You can't go wrong with a blanket of Fontina cheese on top of hearty, warm polenta. But the dish goes astray with what's underneath the polenta: too many cipollini onions and broccoli rabe that presents a big texture differential. They seem out of sync. The duck confit risotto (\$12) is superlative, but the dollop of quince puree on top unnecessarily breaks the rhythm of this toothsome, dreamy dish.

The marinated beet salad (\$9) with arugula, grilled onions, toasted almonds and goat cheese in a red wine vinaigrette got rave reviews from a customer at a neighboring table as I was enjoying the sweet, savory and smoky flavors that came forward in the spinach salad special of the evening (\$9).

A house favorite is the pork chop. Grilled double boned pork chop (\$24) shows off the expertise of the kitchen, as pork is difficult to get right. Here, it's perfectly cooked, remaining juicy and full of flavor. The succulent meat is served with vibrant wilted spinach and a chipotle sweet potato puree, although my companion substituted creamy whipped potatoes. This dish is winning.

The tamarind salmon (\$23) is sweetly reminiscent of the tropics, but it's the caramelized fennel, kalamata olives, grape tomatoes and arugula combination that really ignites the dish. Seared diver scallops (\$25) also do well against an earthy backdrop of risotto woven with wild mushrooms, pancetta, and the sublime intensity of truffle oil.

Desserts, on the night we dined, needed a bit more attention. The chocolate cake with molten center (\$8) was served too cold, thereby eliminating the luscious, richness this nouveau classic usually imparts. And the crème brulee (\$8) needs a little more tweaking before it will be perfect.

The challenge in a place like this is to please the crowd with the kind of food that people rely on while keeping the style current and interesting. The Blomgrens get this place and its customers. They've nailed the atmosphere, the menus, and the genuine hospitality that goes with it. There is no question of Evan Blomgren's expertise, and that certainly comes through in the quality of the food. Yet, it feels as if the best is yet to come. I eagerly await his new spring menu debuting in a few weeks.



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