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IT'S NEW TO US BY JEAN STRATTON



HISTORIC INN: We wanted to honor the building. People really want to have an environment like ours and the food to go with it.” Maria and Evan Blomgren, new owners of the Rocky Hill Inn, Eatory & Tavern, are very proud of their contemporary American cuisine with French and Italian influences and the opportunity to offer it in this historic building.

Historic Rocky Hill Inn, Eatory & Tavern Features American Cuisine With Flair

It dates to 1745, when it received its first “tavern license”; much later, in the 1930s, it was home to many reporters during the Lindbergh Trial, which took place in Flemington. There weren’t many hotels in the area, and the inn was near Hopewell, where the kidnapping took place. After World War II, it no longer functioned as an inn, focusing on food instead. It also served as a filming site for scenes in the 1994 movie, *I.Q.*, featuring Walter Matthau, who played Albert Einstein.

Indeed, the Rocky Hill Inn, at 137 Washington Street, has gone through numerous



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transformations over the years. Most recently, it was the Santa Fe Grill. Then, last summer, it was purchased by Evan and Maria Blomgren, who wanted to restore much of the inn's original character as a setting for Mr. Blomgren's cuisine: American contemporary with French and Italian influences.

"We live in Princeton, and Evan worked with many of the finest food establishments in the Princeton area," notes Ms. Blomgren. "We wanted to bloom where we were planted! We were looking for an establishment that was in sync with Evan's concept of fine food. We also wanted a place that enables us to be with our 5-year-old daughter, Ava."

Chef and proprietor Evan Blomgren had definite ideas about the dining experience he wanted to offer guests. A graduate of New York's French Culinary Institute, and a member of the American Culinary Institute, New Jersey Restaurant Association, and Slow Foods, he has more than 17 years experience in the food industry.

Every Inch

Before he could set to work in the kitchen, however, he and his wife completely renovated and restored the inn to meet their standards. "We spent three months replacing and renovating," says Ms. Blomgren. "There is not one corner that we have not scrubbed and polished. We know every inch of the building.

"There was no designer. We did it all ourselves, all hands-on. We cleaned, painted, chose fixtures, fabrics, and carpet. And the place is laden with antiques, many from Evan's family. A wonderful old rolltop desk and humidior and bookcase are in the foyer. Upstairs, we have a homestead paper signed by Lincoln, granting Evan's mother's family the first farmland in Minnesota. There is even a spittoon outside the ladies' room, and we also have a vintage rooster weathervane from the family farm."

"It's a nice fit — the blend of our family history with the inn's," adds Mr. Blomgren. "It feels right."

They have done a great job. Several choices of dining opportunities await customers. The more formal Rockingham Dining Room is both elegant and understated, with fresh linens and impressive carpeting. The mantels of two fireplaces are adorned with antique Jim Beam decanters originally owned by the chef's father.

Across the hall, the tavern features a rustic bar, accented by exotic hardwood floor and handsome butcher block tables. "You can see the bones of the building in the tavern," points out Ms. Blomgren. "We only used metal and wood, and it has a wonderful authentic look with the wood and warm colors."

Upstairs is the Homestead room for private parties. With its attractive decor, it is an appropriate setting for everything from cocktail parties and rehearsal dinners to a 50th wedding anniversary, baby showers, and wedding receptions — all of which have taken place there since the inn opened last November.

Turret Room

The Turret Room, just adjacent to the tavern and Rockingham Dining Room, is a charming private area, with its round table suitable for two to eight diners. And it features the original tin ceiling.


There is also the opportunity to dine al fresco with seating for 15 outside.

The menu changes seasonally, and fresh ingredients, special recipes, and presentation are all very important at the restaurant. "Everything tastes so fresh," says Ms. Blomgren. "The produce, bread, fish, and meat are fresh every day. We include sustainable produce, and because Evan has been a chef so long, he is familiar with the local farmers and vendors on a personal basis.

"Also, we're known for our presentation. Our plates are shaped like open books. Evan takes a lot of pride in the presentation, and believes that food should look appealing as well as taste good."

Specialties at the restaurant include appetizers, such as lump crab cake with a jicama and beet slaw, and house-made remoulade sauce. Popular soups of the day, made daily, are New England clam chowder, onion gratin, and a "super cream of tomato", according to a recent diner.

Among the favorite dinner entrees are the braised lamb shank shepherds pie, with creamed spinach, topped with mashed potatoes; seared diver scallops, with risotto, wild mushrooms, pancetta, drizzled with white truffle oil. Also in demand is the



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pan-roasted Griggstown Farm chicken over artichoke hearts, fava beans, fingerling potatoes, prosciutto, and finished with a lemon vinaigrette.

Light Fare

Chef Blomgren also offers a meat and fish “addition” to the regular menu every night. Special dietary needs can be accommodated as well.

Another specialty is the Bar Bites menu, assorted light fare that is offered throughout the day. Mediterranean Plate (with Italian meats, cheeses, and olives), three mini burgers with Vermont cheddar, and tomato relish; a Trio of Bruschetta (fava bean puree; tomato, mozzarella and basil; grilled onions and goat cheese), and artisanal cheese plate, with honey, candied nuts, and fruit are among the popular choices.

For lunch, the restaurant’s signature “Rocky Hill Inn Burger” is topped with a sunny-side egg, grilled onions, applewood smoked bacon, and cheese, served with French fries. Also popular is the special Fish ‘n’ Chips, with Old Speckled Hen beer battered cod, hand-cut fries, remoulade, and malt vinegar.

Desserts are not neglected at the inn. Classic creme brulee, chocolate molton with creme Anglaise, and apple, cranberry, walnut bread pudding are all mouth-watering favorites.

Wines and spirits are available, and beer is also a specialty.” We are known for our beer, with 17 draft local, craft beers, and 10 bottled beers,” says Mr. Blomgren. “Wine is also popular. We offer ‘Wine Flights’” three 2-ounce tastings for \$10, and also Beer Samplers, with three 5-ounce glasses for \$9.

In addition, they expect to hold special event wine tastings from time to time, the first having taken place June 16.

All Ages

The inn also offers a variety of the latest and most up-to-date cocktails.

Food prices include appetizers in the \$7 to \$11 range, entrees \$18 to \$27 (half portions are available for selected items), and lunch starting at \$7 and \$9.

With its various dining rooms, the inn can accommodate more than 80 guests, with space for another 40 in the Homestead Room. The Blomgrens are very encouraged with the number of customers since they have opened. “We get a lot of families and lots of couples too,” says Mrs. Blomgren. “It’s all ages. Many people like the opportunity to go out and have a really nice dinner. And one couple said they got engaged here long ago, and are so happy now that the inn has been restored to the way it used to be.

“Some people come every week. Sometimes, the family will come on Tuesday, and then the husband and wife will come back on Saturday for a romantic dinner.

“Also, many people come to the bar every day. It’s like a community gathering place for friendship and socialization. And we have a ‘Happy Hour’ from 3 to 6.”

The Blomgrens look forward to offering their hospitality to many more guests, and they couldn’t be happier that they are off to such a good start, including receiving excellent reviews from area and on-line food critics. “Everyone appreciates the freshness of the food and the special recipes, along with the atmosphere. A lot of the customers say to us: ‘We’re so glad you’re back.’”

The inn is open Tuesday through Friday for lunch 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; for dinner, Monday through Thursday 5 to 9, Friday and Saturday 5 to 10. Reservations are suggested. (609) 683-8930. Website: www.rockyhilltavern.com.

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