

What's New in Princeton & Central New Jersey?

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Let's Try...The Rocky Hill Inn

by E.E. Whiting

She's back! The grand old lady on the corner of Princeton Avenue and Washington Street in Rocky Hill has received her initial face lift and will soon be completely back to her former glory. This venerable restaurant, which has had several incarnations, is housed in a proper Victorian mansion. A fixture in the town, she has been a restaurant for many, many years, most recently as a Mexican watering hole — the Santa Fe Grill at the Rocky Hill Inn. Now, with her interior restored to the period, she is back to serving creative American standard fare with a decided twist.

As you enter the side door, the long, rich wood bar is still the focal point and remains the gathering center. A better entrance is from the front where the Victorian main hall leads to either the bar or the renovated main dining room called the Rockingham Room with large elegant fireplaces. The less formal Tavern Room is adjacent to the bar and, on the night my friends and I were there, was extremely noisy. That area is perfect for groups who want to eat as well as imbibe and who want to be part of the conviviality that a full bar engenders.

The noise notwithstanding, my friends and I were immediately struck by the variety of the menu. The Inn's reputation for offering substantial salads and intriguing appetizers is well earned. We opted to graze our way through the menu beginning with mac & cheese enriched with just the right touch of Maytag Bleu and applewood-smoked bacon (\$8) and a substantial duck confit risotto complete with quince puree and walnuts (\$12). Appetizers are generally between \$8 to \$12 and there are always specials to be tried.

We moved on to main courses of a beet salad; a red and white endive salad with apples, marinated figs, Maytag Bleu, and candied walnuts; and a generous plate of short ribs that fell perfectly into pieces at the touch of a fork. Again, the salads were reasonably priced at around \$10 and indeed were well proportioned to be main courses. The short ribs at \$24 were representative of the variety of pasta, fish, and other meat entrees, which range from the high teens to the mid-20s in price. A very satisfying meal for the three of us, including a bottle of wine (\$22) from the extensive cellar, totaled only \$91 (without tip).

Care has been taken to achieve a balance of interesting flavors and the freshest local produce. Special emphasis has been given to the smart new imperative of keeping the carbon footprint of the menu small. Gourmet meats from Griggstown Farm spotlight this trend.

Chef/proprietor Evan Blomgren and his wife, Maria Blomgren, have used this established venue to begin realizing their dream of a kitchen of their own. A well-known chef in Princeton for many years, Blomgren is a graduate of the French Culinary Institute in New York and has been honing his craft at such prominent restaurants as Lahiere's in Princeton, Chamber's Walk in Lawrenceville, Martine's in New Hope, and Church Street Bistro in Lambertville.

The couple purchased the building in late August and spent a couple of months in construction and renovation. Every element has been completely redone, from the banquettes and ceiling in the Tavern room to the carpeting, paint, restored fireplaces, and chandeliers in the Rockingham room.

The chef's family's antiques are used throughout, including a great-grandfather's rolltop desk; a great-great-great-grandfather's humidor which holds the menus; a family spittoon outside the ladies room; and antique glass bottles belonging to the chef's grandfather. The sign out front reflects the family's heritage: cornstalks honor the chef's mother, Marideanne Blomgren, whose family had a farm in Minnesota for generations; together with the pineapple, a well-known symbol of welcome; the wine cask for the bar inside; and the wheat, heralding the 17 kinds of drafts and 12 other kinds of bottled beer.

The upstairs private dining room, the Homestead Room, continues the tribute to the inn's history as well as the Blomgren family story, with several artifacts. This is actually two rooms that can be combined into one large area accommodating up to 45 people. It is available for corporate functions, and has a lectern and screen. It can also be a private room for showers and parties. The Rockingham room downstairs is also available for private parties and can accommodate 40 seated or 55 to 60 for cocktail parties.

The Blomgrens chose to return to the well-known name of the Rocky Hill Inn and to return the building to its former elegance. The exterior is the next challenge but the interior is complete. The formal rooms are a good choice for visiting parents at the university or, especially at this time of year, for a gathering of friends, large or small. Dress is casual in the bar area but the feel of the restored main rooms would lend itself to something smarter. They offer a more intimate setting for a special dinner out.

Rocky Hill Inn, 137 Washington Street, Rocky Hill. 609-683-8930. www.rockyhilltavern.com. Lunch Tuesday through Friday, 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; happy hour Monday through Friday, 4 to 6 p.m.; dinner Monday through Thursday, 5:30 to 9 p.m. and Friday and Saturday, 5:30 to 10 p.m. Closed Sunday.

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