

# The Boston Globe

## Dining Out

ALISON ARNETT

### Providence's restaurant of the moment

**W**hen was the last time you had to negotiate for a reservation before 6 p.m. on a Wednesday? This rare situation, one that many big-name restaurants in Boston would envy, came up last week when I called Mill's Tavern. No, no room at 6:30, or at 6; just 5 p.m. and after 10 p.m. Well, maybe 5:30 was possible for three, if we promised to slink out by 7:30 when the table was spoken for again. It was a deal.

Mill's Tavern was predictably roomy at 5:30 when we walked into the big, darkly paneled room, sunlight slanting through the floor-to-ceiling shutters. Although the meal felt leisurely, aided by a prompt and attentive waitress, we were well into our meal by 6:15 when the room started filling up. By the time we departed at 7:20 or so, it was full and rollickingly noisy.

The restaurant's owner, Jaime D'Oliveira, who started at Al Forno and was chef of the defunct Angel, has a following. It's one of those Providence things — people are fiercely loyal to their chefs as well as to their mayors. But loyalty only begins to explain Mill's Tavern's obvious success. Instead, its menu and friendly ambience seem to suit the mood of a wide swath of diners. With its understated design, lively bar scene, well-priced wine list, and blend of proper service and casualness, it's the restaurant of the moment in Providence.

The food by chef Jules Ramos, who works with a young-looking crew in a very exposed kitchen, is excellent and, for the most part, almost exaggerated in its simplicity. Somewhat reminiscent of Fore Street in Portland, Maine, the theme is fire — wood-burning oven, rotisserie, grilling — with many dishes served steakhouse style. Diners seem to love this, maybe thinking that they'll get exactly what they want — a plain piece of meat with potatoes as a side dish and no exotic sauces. But it also seems to me a kind of cop-out on both sides. The bone-in, 22-ounce Delmonico ribeye is beautifully grilled

*Alison Arnett is the Globe's restaurant critic.*

#### Mill's Tavern

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**WHERE** 101 North Main St., Providence

**TELEPHONE** 401-272-3331

**PRICES** Appetizers \$6-\$14; entrees \$16.50-\$26; porterhouse for two \$59; desserts \$7.

**NOISE LEVEL** Big and echoing place that gets noisy when crowded.

**HOURS** Dinner: Sun.-Thurs. 5-10 p.m.; Fri.-Sat. 5-11 p.m. Reservations accepted. Smoking at bar only.

**CREDIT CARDS** All major cards.

**ACCESS** Fully accessible.

- \*\*\*\* Extraordinary
- \*\*\* Excellent
- \*\* Very good
- \* Good
- Fair

Ratings reflect the restaurant critic's judgment of the food, service and atmosphere in relation to the price, based on several anonymous visits.

and big enough to feed three, but it's not the sort of dish that showcases a chef's creativity, even with the pleasant balsamic and onion relish.

D'Oliveira and Ramos cover all bases, though, and many dishes do reflect their efforts. Cod roasted in a wood-burning oven has a topping of slightly spicy crabmeat and rests atop a bed of succotash. This is not at all like the succotash you might have eaten as a child. Instead asparagus in a fine mince, fresh corn and peas are blended into a thin, milky corn sauce. The bright flavors of the vegetables, the texture of their crunch, the sweetness of the corn milk, and the zest of the crabmeat topping make a brilliant combination.

Little chunks of salmon tartare are inside a dome woven of thin sheets of smoked salmon, an artfully designed appetizer that pops up frequently these days. But it's pretty, and the ingredients are fine, tied together with generous dollops of caviar and topped with rather ungainly pea shoots.

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An appetizer of figs stuffed with Gorgonzola dolce looks like a birthday gift: Each fig is topped with a fluff of pale frisee, like curly ribbon. Although the fig is sweet, the bite of the Gorgonzola and the salty ham offset that, so what could also be a fine dessert works well as an appetizer. An appetizer of seared foie gras sandwiched in a biscuit studded with black currants and served with tea-braised figs sounds more spectacular than it tastes — pleasant but not a showstopper.

Although a few first courses are intricately composed and smaller, there's no stinting on portions here. Salmon rises like a small hill above a mound of French lentils. The salmon has a nicely crisped surface and an almost creamy rare interior, the fish accented by a chunky tomato jam. It's a simple preparation but very good. My favorite entree didn't make it to the summer menu — a savory rabbit stew over pappardelle. The combination of tender, almost sweet meat in a wine sauce is appealing in its complexity, especially with the accents of salty olives and a few prunes.

A little of that complexity would help the buttermilk marinated chicken, which needs a crisper skin to contrast with the tender flesh. With its accompaniments of pale fingerling potatoes and roasted shallots, the whole dish is rather pallid in taste and color.

Desserts can be too rich in the rather heavy steakhouse style. The Portuguese bread pudding with Madeira caramel is intimidating after the already intimidating entree portions. Ditto on a banana split replete with lots of ice cream and whipped cream; the 9-year-old with us loves it, though. A bittersweet chocolate

torte is winningly dense and not too sweet. The most intriguing dessert is a summer gaspacho, really a raspberry and peach puree with a lovely avocado ice cream, cool and almost buttery tasting against the fruit.

Mill's Tavern has been a scene since it opened in March, and the customers know it. We listen as a foursome appeals to one of the hosts. They don't want to be in the side room — they want to be "where the action is." With some shuffling, they're accommodated and the busy life of this all-things-to-many-diners place goes on, a success story from the start.

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