



DINING REVIEW

Seasonal Elegance from The Restaurant at Weekapaug Inn

The Restaurant at Weekapaug Inn highlights the best of local flavors

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HILARY BLOCK



Stacey Place

Southern Rhode Island is steeped in history. Even before **Giovanni de Verrazano** visited Narragansett Bay in 1524, the Narragansett and Niantic Indian Tribes hunted, fished and farmed their land along the coasts of the ocean and the bay. Native southern Rhode Islanders (myself included) don't always take the time to appreciate the rich history of our section of the state. With summer finally upon us, we begin, just as generations did before us, our love affair with the coastline. Our bathing suit styles may have changed, but our love of the ocean and its bounty has not.

Located in Westerly, **The Weekapaug Inn** has been a summer destination since opening its doors in 1899. Native Rhode Islander **Frederick Buffum** opened the inn to give families like his own a place to boat, swim, sport and socialize. His hospitality was legendary because he treated guests as old friends rather than new acquaintances. The inn relocated from its original oceanfront location after it sustained damage during the hurricane of 1938. The new location on the shore of Quonochontaug Pond provided a safer and secluded setting for vacationers. For seven decades, the Inn thrived on its summer business. Unfortunately, in 2007, the fourth generation of Buffum innkeepers could no longer sustain the single-season business, and the inn closed. In 2010, however, Watch Hill resident **Chuck Royce** helped restore the inn to its former glory and turned the property into a four season resort. Much like Watch Hill's Ocean House, the Weekapaug Inn is a part of the exclusive Relais & Châteaux Hotel and Restaurant Group.

There are several dining options at the Weekapaug Inn. The main dining room is simply named The Restaurant. It offers breakfast, lunch and dinner every day, all year long. Adjacent to the restaurant, the Garden Room is a lovely lounge space which is also open year round. In addition to having great views of the pond, there is a bar and small plates menu. The second floor Sea Room is

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Matunuck

Jamestown

Narragansett

Brunch: The Critic's Picks

Westerly

Wakefield

East Greenwich

open year round for cocktails, but its menu of small plates and sandwiches and outdoor deck seating are only available during the summer months. In order to partake in the variety of the seasonal local produce, meat and seafood, the menus at the inn change frequently. Therefore, the menus when I visited in late spring will differ considerably from the menus available mid-summer. Executive **Chef Jennifer Backman** hails from Washington State but fell in love with Rhode Island during her college days at **Johnson & Wales**. Before arriving to the Weekpaug Inn, she worked at the **Rhode Island Country Club** in Barrington, the **Inn at Castle Hill** and then worked her way up to Executive Sous Chef at the **Ocean House**.



On a gorgeous Rhode Island spring night, my family and I arrived at the Weekpaug Inn, and we were immediately blown away by the ambiance and its perfectly landscaped grounds. Photos of the property do not do it justice. The valet took our car and insisted he be allowed to lead us to the restaurant. Everyone we encountered at the inn was just as pleasant, friendly and willing to serve as the valet. Though the stately inn's appearance was grand, the people who work

there are very friendly and down to earth. We had initially been worried that the Restaurant would be stuffy and pretentious based on the need for a dress code (no shorts), but the worry was unfounded. We were lead to our spacious table on the enclosed veranda, took in the amazing view of Quonochontaug Pond and felt the beauty of the place relax our modern cares away.

Our waitress, Leah, could not have been nicer or more helpful, and her team of bussers and servers was attentive to our every need. To start, we were provided a choice of still or sparkling water. I loved being able to choose sparkling at no extra cost. We also ordered a round of cocktails. My choice, the Block Island Paloma (\$15), was a mix of Milagro Tequila, fresh squeezed grapefruit juice, Aquidneck Honey and sumac. It was very refreshing and perfect for the warm night. My parents chose an expertly mixed Ketel One Martini (\$11) and a glass of Anton Baurer Gruner Veltliner (\$11). Along with our cocktails, we sampled the bread basket filled with a variety of rolls (sourdough, rosemary olive and raisin and anise). The breads were served with choices of two butters - one whipped with sea salt, the other with olive oil and honey - both were divine. Along with the bread, we were served a delectable amuse bouche - confit artichoke salad. For our starter, we all nibbled on the New England Artisan Cheese Sampler (\$21). On this night, the three cheeses were all from Cato Corner Farm in Colchester, CT. The cheeses were served with grilled breads and a variety of luscious accompaniments (honey, apricot compote, quince paste and a hazelnut spread). We had a great time sampling all of the things on the plate.

With four of us dining, we were able to sample a variety of the entrées. I settled on the Native Blackfish (\$36). In this area, blackfish is more commonly known as tautog. It is a flaky, white fish with a mild flavor. At The Restaurant, the blackfish is simply pan seared to flaky fish perfection and sits on a purée of carrot and saffron. It was served with a mélange of seasonal vegetables - from fresh peas to ramps to parsnips. My father chose the Georges Bank Scallops (\$38) and was rewarded with four large scallops, flawlessly seared with a dark golden crust. The scallops were sitting on a bed of coconut scented forbidden black rice and topped with peppery togarshi, fennel-citrus relish and a sweet blood orange

emulsion. My mother ordered the **Baffoni Chicken** (\$30). The chicken was moist and flavorful with both the dark meat of the leg and the white meat of the breast on her platter. She loved the lemon papardelle noodles served with the chicken, and she tried to soak up every bit of the green-peppercorn Madeira jus. The friend I brought along on this family night tried the Tortelloni (\$36). Her bowl was literally full to the brim with eight large homemade tortelloni stuffed with sweet pea and **Narragansett Creamery** ricotta. They were served with preserved lemon and the most delicious house smoked bacon. Other than the tortelloni, the portions were not large, but everything tasted fresh and was prepared extremely well.

The dessert menu had five different options all created by **Pastry Chef Jaimie Lindberg**. Since it was my father's birthday, we let him choose dessert, and he picked Lindberg's Flavors of S'mores creation (\$10). This dessert had all of the things you love about s'mores taken to the next level. There was a chocolate covered Bavarian chocolate mousse cake, handmade cinnamon graham cracker, housemade toasted marshmallows and my favorite part, dark cherries. The inn also offers a really fun dessert option – s'mores cooked over a bonfire on the shore of **Quonochontaug Pond**. We saw several families who were staying at the inn go down and enjoy this fun and tasty activity. Best of all, this option is free! The hospitality didn't end until we paid the bill and Leah brought us out two bags of brownie cookies for the ride home.



Though staying at the inn or enjoying a meal there is not an inexpensive activity, anyone can tour the grounds or public areas. Just as in the days of Frederick Buffum, you will be welcomed as a cherished guest and treated to hospitality one rarely finds in the service industry anymore. As you sip a cocktail, make a s'more, enjoy a lobster roll or play a lawn game, you can imagine you are back in a simpler time and let the cares of the modern world fade away. As Pitbull eloquently puts it, sometimes "to understand the future, you have to go back in time."

The Restaurant at Weekapaug Inn

25 Spray Rock Road Westerly
322-0301

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