

Restaurant review: A superior experience at the Weekapaug Inn

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Although I grew up in these parts, my only contact with the previous incarnation of the Weekapaug Inn was when I drove all the way down the beach and had to turn around in its parking lot because that was where the road ended.

In 1992, New York Magazine described it as "a time warp of Wasp gentility." It wasn't air conditioned, and there were no TVs or telephones in the rooms. But there were books and jigsaw puzzles and board games and three family-style meals a day that came with your room. It was a retreat for the wealthy, a place to get away from it all, breathe in the sea air, and leave your worries behind.

In 2007, the inn closed, at first for renovation, but as years passed, its future seemed uncertain. Then in 2010, Ocean House owner Chuck Royce and Weekapaug resident Lang Wheeler began their transformation of the place. Their goal, according to the inn's website, was to "restore the inn to discerning standards of comfort and low-key luxury." Today's Weekapaug Inn has 27 rooms instead of the previous 62, plus four two-bedroom suites. There still aren't any TVs, unless you request one. There still aren't phones (an intercom links the rooms to the front desk), but there is free wi-fi.

As for the food, the restaurant at the inn serves breakfast, lunch and dinner daily and is open to the public. Actually, it's more than open to the public. The public is welcomed heartily, not only to enjoy a cocktail or a meal, but to wander around the inn's common spaces, sit a spell by the fireplace, or take in the sweeping view from the second floor deck.

The place and the staff are downright charming.

The restaurant is at the back, in a large, window-lined room on Quonchontaug Pond. We first went for a weekday lunch, and from our window seat, clammers could be seen hunched over in the shallows.

My husband chose the Soup of the Moment, a corned beef stew, \$8, and the fish and chips (beer-battered cod, with house-made potato chips), \$16. I tried the New England clam chowder, \$8, and the chicken pot pie (with puff pastry and roasted garlic gravy), \$17.

When it comes to "comfort and low-key luxury," it's all in the details. Each rattan dining room chair comes with a fluffy back pillow, for custom comfort. My mango ice tea was accompanied by a small pitcher of simple syrup, so I didn't have to deal with pesky sugar crystals.

Our lunch was piping hot and delicious, start to finish. My husband's soup tasted like a corned beef dinner, with a rich, salty broth, big chunks of meat, and just the right amount

of cabbage and potato. My chowder was thick, full of tender clams and bacon. Both were served in a Weekapaug Inn mug.

The fish was lightly battered, crispy and perfectly cooked. The chips were plentiful and irresistible. The chicken pot pie was over the top, a bowl of braised chicken and fresh peas in dark, rich gravy, topped with a circle of puff pastry. So good.

Our second visit was for dinner on a Sunday night. The dinner menu wears its local ingredients proudly; almost every offering's name includes the origin of its parts: Hopkins Farm lamb, Matunuck oysters, Crescent Farms duck.

My husband began with the spring onion soup, which featured Narragansett Cremery yogurt and house bacon, \$13. He also chose the lamb - braised, served with gnocci, a shallot confit, and grilled Brussels sprouts leaves, \$36.

I chose the native field greens salad, which included an array of baby greens and herbs, quenelles of local ricotta cheese, and pink grapefruit supremes, \$12. For my dinner, I went with the Georges Bank monkfish atop forbidden rice, with a basil, lobster, coconut broth and grilled bok choy, \$34.

Again, the details. My husband's bowl arrived empty, save a dollop of yogurt topped with crumbled bacon and a flurry of green garnishes, bisected by a long, thin crouton that spanned the bowl. The waiter added the soup from a white pitcher. The soup was fresh and light, with the yogurt adding a silky creaminess.

The greens in my salad tasted as though they'd been picked to order, all crispy, some bitter, others tangy. They paired beautifully with the cheese and the grapefruit. Certainly, \$12 is a lot to pay for a salad, but this one was darn good.

My husband's dinner warmed the chilly spring night. The braised lamb was tender and flavorful, but the gnocci were perfect - tender, chewy little pillows that elevated the dish way beyond ordinary. As to the monkfish, I can't imagine how it could have been improved. Two small filets were sautéed to a uniform, golden crust. The black forbidden rice was creamy and tender yet delightfully chewy. The broth was rich, fragrant, and tied the whole dish together.

For dessert, the espresso crème brulee was creamy and decadent. Its crackly sugar crust was topped with banana-brown sugar mousse and two tiny churros. It was even better than it sounds.

Executive Chef Jennifer Backman, a Johnson & Wales graduate, came to the Weekapaug Inn via the Ocean House. Her dishes showcase the amazing local ingredients she has found, and the quality of her preparation is consistently impeccable from dish to dish.

Dinner at the Weekapaug Inn is an expensive excursion, no doubt, but if our experience is any indication, it's well worth it.

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The Weekapaug Inn

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www.weekapauginn.com

Cuisine: Modern interpretations of New England coastal classics featuring fresh, local ingredients.

Atmosphere: The place drips with beachy elegance.

Service: Formal, but very friendly and welcoming.

Prices: Lunch entrees up to \$18; dinner entrees up to \$44.

Hours: Daily. Breakfast, 7 to 10 a.m.; lunch, 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; dinner, 6 to 9 p.m. Cocktails and the lunch menu are available in the inn's two lovely lounges, the Garden Room downstairs and the Sea Room upstairs, from 11:30 to 9 p.m.

Credit cards: Yes.

Reservations: A good idea, particularly after Memorial Day.

Handicapped access: No steps to enter the inn, with elevators inside. Fully wheelchair accessible.