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At the Table Carol Deptolla
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Fine Dining With Muscle

Amid strong surroundings, Smyth offers dishes with robust flavors

Smyth makes me want to be a tourist in my own town.

The fine-dining restaurant in the Iron Horse Hotel, a refurbished former factory and warehouse from the turn of the last century, stands stylish and polished but exudes a brawny, muscular feel. It gives a sense of place - of a city that built the things that made America run.

And the menu meshes with that. It defines the dishes as “rustic Americana,” and many do project a homey feeling with a sense of the Midwest, yes, but they’re refined, too.

Mostly, they’re delicious. Some remarkable flavors are coming out of the kitchen headed by chef Thomas Schultz.

One dinner in particular stands out, and it started with the Blue & Blue appetizer (\$8): among the best bluegill fillets I’ve had - delicate, flaky, sweetly flavored and meaty (for bluegill, that is), fried in a crushed saltine crust.

The tartar sauce was dotted with dill and Carr Valley’s Billy Blue cheese. This will never work, I thought; blue cheese is too strong a flavor for delicate fish. I was delighted to be proved wrong.

The fish was one of several appetizers portioned for a single diner. Among appetizers meant to be shared - available in portions for one, two, four or six people - the West Coast mussels were supreme (\$10 to \$25).



Smyth, the fine-dining restaurant in the Iron Horse Hotel, 500 W. Florida St., has Edison-style lights, comfy black leather chairs and banquettes. The “windows” on the back wall actually are mirrors, helping to expand the modest-sized dining room visually.



The rock shrimp and avocado salad is served in an avocado shell with a raspberry vinaigrette.



The farm-raised meat in venison osso buco is mild, but the shank’s marrow is wild to the bone.

This savory dish of mussels steamed in ale was previously served at the hotel's bar, Branded, before Smyth opened May 1. With Swiss chard, sausage and white beans in a light tomato broth, it was a dish I wanted every drop of; the warm sourdough delivered to the table at the meal's outset was put to good use mopping it up.

Other sharing appetizers don't particularly show what the kitchen can do but are a showcase for state products, such as the Wisconsin cured-meat board (\$12 to \$24), which included smoked duck breast from Nueske's, and a Wisconsin cheese board (\$12 to \$24), sweetened with grapes, dried apricots and herbed honey. A seafood tower (\$32 to \$115) with crabmeat, prawns and oysters wasn't as satisfying; the oysters in particular were unimpressive.

But a rock shrimp and avocado salad (\$12), served in an avocado shell, tasted light and fresh; the citrus dressing and a raspberry vinaigrette coloring the plate were ideal foils.

Entrées were the menu's strong suit, reliably flavorful and well-prepared. The farm-raised meat itself in venison osso buco (\$28) was mild, but the shank's marrow tasted like essence of venison, wild to the bone. The tender meat, sparked with lemon, fell away with the poke of a fork. It was paired with a traditional saffron risotto, so utterly delicious and creamy that I only wanted more, even if I do prefer the rice with a slightly firmer texture.

Depth of flavor could again be found in the entrée's vegetarian offering, market pasta (\$16) - plentiful garlic and white wine spiked the broccoli, cauliflower, onion, brussels sprouts leaves and other roasted vegetables. The entrée can be made gluten-free with zucchini ribbons in place of penne rigate.

For a homey entrée, there's buttermilk pan-fried chicken (four portion sizes, from \$14 for a quarter to \$28 for a whole). You couldn't ask for a juicier, crispier bird. With it came green beans on the cusp of tender and perfect whipped potatoes, creamy without being heavy.



The red snapper is a sweet, tender fillet that's pan seared. Steamed Manila clams, roasted red pepper, fingerling potatoes and asparagus fill out the dish.

Fish entrées I tried were keepers, including the red snapper (\$27): a sweet, tender fillet pan-seared at high heat to crisp it. Steamed Manila clams, roasted red pepper, fingerling potatoes and asparagus (a couple of spears with tough ends that needed trimming) filled out this eye-catching dish.

Firm but flaky mahi-mahi (\$22) with excellent flavor lay over a short rib hash and green beans. Often, composed entrées taste best when bits of each element are eaten together; it's the combination that's transcendent. This time, though, I liked the components better eaten separately.

It's worth investigating daily entrée specials if they're all as good as the Wisconsin rack of lamb I tried (\$36). The tender, full-flavored lamb with an appealing crust needed no enhancement, but the blackberry-blueberry reduction with it was a lovely match, as were the wild rice pancakes and sautéed spinach.

Desserts are indeed homey; it's one area of the menu that could be expanded. Not that there's anything wrong with a brownie-blondie sundae (\$9), which tops a brownie with chocolate ice cream, a blondie with vanilla, and the whole thing with chocolate sauce and nuts; or with a s'more (\$7), based on a house-made graham round, two layers of flourless chocolate cake and toasted marshmallow and served with ice cream and caramel-rum sauce; or with an apple-cherry cobbler (\$6). No, sir.

But desserts with a bit more dazzle that still honor the local heritage - a modern, engaging take on schaum torte, maybe, or wider use of local flavors? - certainly would suit the rest of the experience.

That experience includes the handsome dining room with spacious wooden tables, comfortable leather banquettes and chairs, and half-walls clad in thin tiles that provide a sense of privacy for freestanding tables. Hefty flatware that looks like hammered metal and nail-head trim on the chairs emphasize the craft theme here.

Smyth's wine list is a mix of some familiar names with plenty of enjoyable discoveries, with more than half the bottles from the New World. A few are at celebration-bottle prices; about half are \$50 or under. A list of wines by the glass is user-friendly, describing the wines and specifying the dishes with which they would pair well.

Service largely was exceptional - polished, attentive, warm and considerate. Servers brought extra plates and serving spoons for sharing dishes unsolicited, checked that we were happy with our meals and made sure we wanted nothing else before presenting the checks. Excellent, rich coffee, water and flatware were refreshed when needed.

With that kind of attention, I was surprised when one server neglected to ask a companion if she wanted another soft drink; it was a rare misstep. On two visits, I learned the soup of the day by overhearing it from a nearby table's server, not ours. And I do wish prices were given with the recitation of specials and desserts.

A minor annoyance with the cocktail list - the one I wanted to try on my first visit was no longer being prepared; some six weeks later on my final visit, it still was on the list. In that time, either a new list should have been printed or guests warned at the outset that it's unavailable.

But on my last visit, our server thanked us sincerely and asked us to return. After a night of feeling pampered at the table, I wanted nothing more.

Though I had some quibbles, overall the dishes I tried were deeply satisfying and delicious, the service professional and attentive, and the room lively and comfortable. In celebrating craft, Smyth builds a memorable evening for its guests.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BENNY SIEU

Deptolla's Star Ratings

★★★★ Extraordinary: Consistently outstanding in all areas, including food, service, atmosphere and value. A first-class dining experience.

★★★ Very good: Most menu items are excellent, though a few might miss the mark. Service generally is very good. A memorable meal is guaranteed.

★★ Good: A worthy restaurant; food is generally appealing.

★ Fair: A few entrées may be very good; most are average. Work is needed. Carol Deptolla dines anonymously with food and drink paid for by the Journal Sentinel.

SMYTH

500 W. Florida St., in the Iron Horse Hotel
(414) 831-4615, theironhorsehotel.com

★★★½ (very good to extraordinary)

Food: ★★★½

Service: ★★★½

Ambience: ★★★★★

Fare: New American, inspired by the Midwest

Atmosphere: Contemporary urban meets vintage industrial

Hours: Lunch, 11 a.m.-2 p.m. Monday-Friday;

Dinner, 5-10 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday, 5-11 p.m. Friday-Saturday;

Brunch, 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Sunday

Prices: Entrées, \$14-\$36

Parking: On street. Valet available; \$5 for diners with validation.

Wheelchair Access: Yes

Payment: MasterCard, Visa, American Express, Discover, Diners Club

Smoking policy: No smoking

Reservations: Recommended Friday-Saturday and during large festivals or other events

Noise level: Moderate at peak times