

A warm welcome awaits at the Historic Grain House Coppertop Tavern

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Josh Rogoff, head bartender at Coppertop Tavern, has some interesting stories to tell about the establishment's many unique features.
Written by

COPPERTOP TAVERN

WHERE: The Grain House at Old Mill Inn, 225 Route 202, Basking Ridge

VIBE: Truly historic building, beautifully restored; olde-world hospitality matches the authenticity

PAYMENT: All major cards

HEAD BARTENDER: Josh Rogoff

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Josh Rogoff is head bartender at Coppertop Tavern in the Grain House at The Olde Mill Inn. Originally a grist mill and barn on land acquired from William Penn, the building stored flour, meal and feed for the Continental Army during the bitter winter of 1779-80.

“Believe it or not, many of our customers tell us they’ve passed hundreds of times and never stopped in,” Rogoff says. “Even a good portion of our employees knew about us only through other employees. 245 years and so many people still hadn’t heard of us.”

But that ended when Casper, Bruce, Jon, Barbara and Brenda Bocina took over the Olde Mill Inn in the early '90s. The Bocinas changed everything – the appearance (Rogoff: “It was almost like the Bates Motel”), the cuisine, and the concept. The Inn now boasts impeccable grounds and a sterling reputation.

The gleaming copper-topped surface that gives name to the tavern glints in mirrors and bottles. The pub is rustic, cozy – stuccoed, beamed, timbered, with a stone fireplace and guests sitting in captain’s chairs. (Meals are also available in the bar.)

“There are no places like this where I am,” says Rogoff, who commutes from Staten Island.

In 2000, he went to school in Florida and started there at Houston’s, a privately-owned chain.

“It was a great learning experience; I made the drinks, desserts, coffees and cappuccinos – a lot of variety and you had to move fast. People skills you can learn but in restaurants, everything’s about fast. I found I was good at it.”

He returned to New York and eventually met and worked with Paul Healy, a former manager at Red Lobster and Cheesecake Factory. By March 2005, Healy was manager at Olde Mill Inn and Rogoff joined the staff.

“I love working here,” he says. “It’s a nice area, unique atmosphere, a great grown-up meeting place. I enjoy nighttime bartending – even if it’s 50 people, I don’t find it work.”

“Apparently, I make very good martinis. I learned that at Houston’s. They taught me to make real martinis the right way – not foodie martinis. The younger people (Rogoff is 36) just haven’t learned properly.”

Contrary to Bond, it should be stirred. “There are people who do specify shaken, but that’s usually only if they want it ice-cold.”

Coppertop has 12 beers on tap (10 basic drafts) and two seasonal – currently October and Winter Ales; the special Grain House custom-brewed Coppertop Ale; an amber ESB (extra-special bitter) ale “best described as a balanced beer with notes of honey, toffee and caramel, and backed by a warm spicy hop bitterness.”

Seasonal drinks feature hot cider – Captain Morgan’s with apple cider, Southern Comfort with apricot and cider, and various cider/liqueur mixtures.

“Paul (Healy) is restaurant manager and Betz (Moreck, assistant) makes all the decisions on drinks,” Rogoff says.

The Grain House is a magnet for every kind of function. Adjacent to the restaurant is a newly-created organic garden from which executive chef Luca Carvello harvests ingredients for the Grain menu.

“Verizon’s headquarters are nearby and they use us for everything,” Rogoff says. “People from every state come frequently throughout the year so we get to see the same faces and establish relationships.”

There are lots of stories. Social media: It has had an enormous impact on the pub scene.

“We get a lot of repeat daytime groups who re-connect and meet to catch up. They used to bring pictures of their grandkids and family, but now they all have iPads.” He laughs. “Even my mom has one.”

Online dating: “We see a lot of first dates, especially widowed and divorced adults,” but Rogoff recalls a particular stand-out.

“Three weeks in a row, a guy showed up during the day with a different lady. He seemed affluent but wasn’t well-received. One of the girls noticed it first: ‘Wasn’t he here last week with a blonde?’ It looked like he was taking online to a new level but wasn’t fooling anybody. We called him the serial dater.”

“Another time, an older man, carrying a cane and probably in his ’80s, asked us if he could bring his dog in with him. We assumed he had a service dog – perfectly acceptable. Then he limped his dog on a leash – the dog looked like it needed a service dog. We didn’t have the heart to say no, and we weren’t busy. The dog just lay down next to him and went to sleep.”

The weekly Sunday brunch attracts a lot of families and part of the bar’s charm is the stone fireplace that incorporates an authentic built-in warming cupboard.

Rogoff: “One Sunday, a little guy, 3 or 4, quietly walks down the steps, looks around, goes over to the fireplace (not lit), and goes in the little door. You can see how it would be irresistible to a kid. I opened it and said ‘peek-a-boo’ and picked him up.” He laughs. “I brought him into the dining room and said, (to the parents), ‘Is this yours?’ ”