

DINING

Restaurants With a History, and a Little More

By KARLA COOK

AFTER the contemplative experience of visiting meadows where battles once were fought, there's often hunger. Hunger to learn more, certainly, but also real hunger, the one of pangs in the belly and an intense desire for food.

But assuaging hunger while maintaining the historic mood can be challenging. The few historic restaurants I've experienced have been high on history, low on ceiling heights and, frankly, low in the enjoyment of food.

Can you get a good meal at a historic restaurant in New Jersey? In an effort to answer the question, I had a meal at two places that stake claims to history. At one, I had very good food; at the second, I had some good food. Careful choosing is required at both, since both menus have weak spots.

The Grain House Restaurant

Connected by a vast parking lot and a wooden bridge to the Olde Mill Inn in Basking Ridge, this white clapboard structure has origins in the 18th century and was used as storage for the Continental Army in the winter of 1779, according to the restaurant's management. It also served as the inn from 1930 to 1977, when a new inn was built.

The main dining room, with a fireplace at one end and low rough-hewn doorways at the other, was the original wagon and machinery room. The feel is colonial, and the mood on a Saturday night visit was festive, probably because of spillover from the inn, which is popular for special occasions.

There is some locally produced food on the menu, but the culinary inspiration, led by Alex Stoffels, a 2001 French Culinary Institute graduate, is thoroughly modern and global.

Skip the clichés — calamari, steak sliders, shrimp cocktail — and try the succulent spicy lamb sausage, served with a balancing yogurt-cucumber sauce and appealing grilled flatbread; and the crab cake, with its sweet and tender meat juxtaposed against a fiery mayonnaise spiked with Sriracha, a Southeast Asian hot sauce.

Salads were the appetizers' equal; a panzanella, omitting the usual bread, was a simple, elegant mix of organic greens, red onion, cucumber, olives and fat wedges of heirloom tomatoes from Wightman's Farms, across the road from the restaurant. The Italian-inspired figs with arugula, prosciutto and Parmigiano-Reggiano lacked only a smidgen more dressing to better meld the components.



QUIET TIME The Yankee Doodle Tap Room, above, at the Nassau Inn in Princeton, with its Norman Rockwell mural.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY LAURA PEDRICK FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



ROUGH HEWN The building housing the Grain House Restaurant in Basking Ridge can trace its history to the 1700s.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY AARON HOUSTON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

A special grilled pork chop was nicely presented and prepared, with well-seasoned Yukon gold potatoes mashed with goat cheese and tender-crunchy, though skimpy, asparagus.

The pasta in the house-made pappardelle was overcooked, but otherwise, the dish was interesting, with fresh wilted spinach, shiitake mushrooms, roasted eggplant, grape tomatoes and sliced garlic.

Next time I would visit Basking Ridge

in daylight, so I could see where Mr. Stoffels plans to plant his garden in the spring, as well as the old oak tree at the Presbyterian Church graveyard, where George Washington may or may not have picnicked.

Yankee Doodle Tap Room

The Nassau Inn, built in the late 1930s to replace the original 1756 structure where Paul Revere, Robert Morris,

Thomas Paine and others stayed, is only a mile from Princeton Battlefield State Park, the site that marks the start of George Washington's key fight with the British, but it is only a block from Princeton University's ivy-covered Nassau Hall. That's where the battle ended — and where visitors now scour the exterior walls for evidence of the cannonballs reportedly fired.

Back at the inn, dinner is under the direction of Matt Goldman, a 2001 grad-

GRAIN HOUSE RESTAURANT
Inn, 225 Route 202, Basking Ridge, N.J. (800) 585-4461, www.grainhouseinn.com. Dinner daily; lunch Tuesday through Saturday; brunch Sunday. Three-course dinner, \$18; two-course lunch, \$12. Wines start at \$18 a bottle.

YANKEE DOODLE TAP ROOM
Inn, 10 Palmer Square, Princeton, N.J. (800) 862-7728, www.nassauinn.com. Breakfast, lunch and dinner. Main courses at dinner. Wines start at \$26 a bottle.

uate of the Culinary Institute of America and executive chef. He is friendly and engaging, and he shares his knowledge of the place with his kids. But on an early visit, the restaurant was so empty that a chair scraping across the floor was most echoed.

We settled in with a drink about a dozen on tap. I had hoped to study the 1937 Norman Rockwell mural in the bar, but it was tucked away from the view. Happily, the food was good. Salads, came quickly. Sliced roasted beets with pine nuts, bits of blue cheese vinaigrette that put it together; the other, with dressed spinach, poached walnuts and a sliver of cheese came together.

A standout main course was a to-crust roasted steak, tender and crunchy on the outside, hot on the inside, with a white sauce that brightened the palate. A condiment of asparagus spears.

In second place was a sandwich that turned out to be a serving of French fries. The open-faced sandwich was said to be beer-braised beef with caramelized onion and parmesan cheese.

Then things slipped. The first was a smallish pizza with a stale-tasting bun, topped with a serving of cabbage-carrots. The lamb was more like mutton, had a heavy texture, and the lentils were laden with an oil. I adamantly opposing the remarkably similar texture of the carrots, while pretty good, the fighting.

I'd really rather read