

Dancing Dinosaurs

By Geoff Kalish, M.D.

With all the excitement generated by daring new eateries featuring “new” Italian, “haute” Iberian, and Asian, Cuban or Turkish fusion, how vital are the old standbys? Do our favorite, time-tested meals still excite the palate in a world seemingly awash in foams and infusions? Is the traditional progression of appetizer-entrée-dessert rendered a quaint notion by the anything-goes world of tapas and do-it-yourself protein/side/sauce combinations? And is formal wait service (with a “captain,” et al) still relevant, or best consigned to the age of butlers and under-stair maids? We visited two highly regarded restaurants, generally considered bastions of traditional fare and service, to see if they’re lumbering toward extinction or finding their own niche in the region’s rapidly evolving restaurant scene. The verdict? These venerable “dinosaurs” can still compete on these stomping grounds—or anywhere else.

Crabtree’s Kittle House Restaurant & Inn

11 Kittle Road, Chappaqua

666-8044; www.kittlehouse.com

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Expect to pay \$100 to \$120 for dinner for two (excluding wine, tax, and tip). Open for lunch Monday through Friday (Sunday brunch) and daily for dinner. Reservations suggested, especially for weekends and Sunday brunch.

Once upon a time, the KITTLE HOUSE was the place to take visiting relatives for very traditional Stouffer-frozen-dinner-like fare in a musty, country-inn setting. Then, in the early 1980s, along came the Crabtrees (Dick and Columbia English literature-graduate son, John), who refurbished the facility, built a world-class wine list, developed a cadre of professional, caring servers and, less happily, earned a reputation for annoyingly inconsistent New American cuisine.

However, we have good news to report. Based on a number of visits this past year, the fare at CRABTREE’S KITTLE HOUSE is no longer inconsistent. In fact, it soars to a lofty level found at only a very few other area establishments. Moreover, despite its stolid image, the Kittle House is very much in step with the times. Dishes are creative, with worldly flair, and while some newer establishments make a lot of noise about using locally sourced ingredients, few do it as resoundingly well as the Kittle House. Happily, the almost “retro” style of formal service remains unchanged. A captain takes your order and a specific waiter brings the food. And although this restaurant has served President Clinton and numerous luminaries, it’s not the kind of place that fawns over favorites and ignores more plebian diners. I am known to John Crabtree as a wine and food writer, yet I’m not afforded any “special treatment” beyond that given to a regular patron.

A Sunday evening meal serves as an example of recent experiences here. Soon after being seated in comfortable chairs at a well-appointed table in the main dining room, we are brought an amuse-bouche of ripe Camembert cheese and a single duck ravioli. Seemingly incongruous, the flavors marry harmoniously and pair perfectly with sips of fruity Prosecco from Italy. After ordering appetizers and main courses, we select for comparison (and to match our food), two half-bottles of 2001 red Burgundy from an encyclopedic list of more than 5,000 different brands. The delicate, fruit-forward Daniel Rion Premier Cru Vosne-Romanée (\$41 a half-

bottle), gets the nod as our early favorite, but as the meal continues we prefer the Clos des Lambrays Morey-St.-Denis Grand Cru (\$71 a half-bottle), with complex flavors of herbs and black cherry that mate memorably with the fare.

After a short wait, appetizers arrive. An artistic mix of jumbo lump blue crab, avocado, tomatoes, passion fruit and taro proves light and tasty with the accompaniments imparting an exotic flavor to the silky crab meat. Each of a decadent trio of Hudson Valley foie gras preparations—a torchon, brochette, and brûlée—comes with a small portion of sweet fruit to act as a foil for the heady duck liver. An entrée of magret of Long Island duck, medium-rare as ordered, arrives atop a flavorful mix of sweet cipollini onions, soybeans, and maitake mushrooms, all doused in a fragrant pool of Bing cherry broth. Sautéed fennel beneath a main course of a meaty, pan-seared snapper filet adds a lusty flavor and crunch to the dish. Following sorbet, we partake in two ethereal desserts, a rich, white chocolate parfait and a “ménage a chocolate” (layers of hazelnut tort, chocolate ganache, milk chocolate mousse, and crème chantilly served with a shot glass of warm white chocolate). As you’ve probably discerned by now, Crabtree’s Kittle House is an excellent restaurant—and not only by Westchester standards. The food, service and wine selection here rivals recent experiences at some of Manhattan’s highest rated spots. And, in summary, the fare at these two establishments seemed neither staid nor dated when compared to newer area spots touting more adventurous dining. Moreover, the elegant table settings and traditional style service provided by well-trained staff enhanced the overall experiences, making them very special—even on a Sunday evening.