

**Westchester Magazine, August 2008**

***Tried-and-True Dining: Crabtree's Kittle House***

**Chappaqua's landmark restaurant is still the place for fine meals in a down-home dining room.**

This is not a restaurant review. According to the guidelines published by the Association of Food Journalists, the ethics of restaurant criticism demand that critics maintain their anonymity—and, in my recent trips to Crabtree's Kittle House, I can't swear that I wasn't recognized. In the past, I have had brief, face-to-face conversations with John Crabtree (who was present on the nights of my visits), and I've spoken to Maître d' Gustavo Zuluaga once. Westchester Magazine was in an awkward position: Crabtree's Kittle House was due for a re-review, yet all of the magazine's critics were known to the restaurant. And, while the notion of putting me in a wig was joyfully bandied about by the magazine's editors, this particular critic balked. I was sure that I'd be greeted by, "Julia? Is that you?" And there I'd stand, looking like an idiot in a wig.

So let's assume I was recognized during my visits, although I am not positive that this is true. I will say that the meals we ate for this non-review were on par with anonymous meals I've had at Crabtree's, and—in both cases—the food at Crabtree's was delicious.

Crabtree's is a Westchester dining institution, known as much for its extensive wine list as for its excellent food. The exterior of the 218-year-old structure is still gracious, and its lawns are still inviting, but this is not the glitziest dining room in Westchester. While other restaurants spend large portions of your dining dollar on showy rooms (featuring sculptural light fixtures, water walls, expensive murals, and inscrutable bathrooms), the Kittle House puts every penny either on your plate or in your glass. And while high-style AvroKO designs have become the norm in New York City (creating a sort of sameness of fabulousness), Crabtree's has maintained its down-at-the-heels individuality.

Our meals started with a pretty amuse shooter of Charantais melon soup with tiny watermelon cubes, present on each visit. While my husband enjoyed his, I felt that the honey-sweet melon was too cloying for a teaser—plus, it had the slightly alcoholic note of fermentation. After the amuse, starters were uniformly excellent. Our five-course tasting menu started with bluefin tuna two ways, served on a pretty slab of pink Hawaiian salt. I'd have been content with four more courses of this bravura dish: cool, spicy tartare paired with slices of barely seared loin, a bright slaw of carrots, breakfast radishes, and soybeans, and taro chips. It was a thoughtful exploration of the royal fish's properties—fatty, lush tartare and pure, minimalist loin—well contrasted by the zippy slaw and crunchy taro chips.

While salads can seem why-bother at a lot of restaurants, my oozing, panko-crusted farm egg on asparagus purée with crisp, distinctly flavored field greens (including spicy cress and peppery rocket) was a salad to dine out for. It was the tastiest, most pleasing salad I've eaten in a while, and, with its minted vinaigrette, it felt like a welcome to summer.

A trio of Hudson Valley foie gras arrived as a truly scrumptious mousse (perfectly complemented by a heady vanilla seed-and-pear relish); bursting seared lobes (on a skewer with a floral grilled apricot); and a brûlée with a thin sugar crust. All were delicious, and again, explored a range of the foie's properties. And while pairing foie gras with sweet wine has become de rigueur, we were intrigued by the harmonizing fruit of a 2003 Oremus Tokaji Late Harvest rather than the more commonplace Beumes de Venise or Sauternes.

The wine cellar at the Kittle House is a vast labyrinth of narrowing aisles and taller, ever more rickety stacks of wine. The restaurant's complete wine list is a phone-book-sized volume, so unwieldy that most diners only see the abbreviated version. Given its cellar—and the pressure to serve wine at (and not beyond) its peak—the Kittle House offers great deals on wines by the glass. While oenophiles will want to scrutinize the bottle list and debate its universe of choices, we allow the Kittle House to choose glasses for each course. This strategy gives us the widest variety of flavors, and the changing wines are always thoughtfully paired with the menu.

After a not exactly palate-cleansing, but nevertheless delicious, intermezzo of potato-and-bacon foam (served at each visit), we stuck into the Kittle House's mains. "Steak and Eggs"—a Kittle House classic of filet mignon with quail eggs, porcini mousse, and red-wine sauce—is my favorite treatment of filet. The buttery, mild taste was intensified by the umami notes of porcini mushrooms, extended by a beefy red-wine reduction and complemented by the luxurious, oozing yolk of poached quail's egg. The dish was further enhanced by a big, peppery Syrah, whose elegant tobacco notes made me miss my days as a smoker.

Less brawny, our pork chop with gingered peaches, rhubarb, toasted-garlic broccolini, and spinach spaetzle was refined, the ginger, rhubarb, and peaches making the tender, thick-cut Berkshire pork nearly poetic. Unfortunately, the spinach spaetzle was mushy; we wished the kitchen had given us a plain version. Nevertheless, our enjoyment was enhanced by a glass of Giovanni Corino's perfumed 1999 Pozzo Barbera D'Alba, whose fruit-laden, herbal notes tasted like an orchard breeze, complementing the pork beautifully.

Tasting menus can overwhelm by the third course, yet our magret of Long Island duckling (with confit dumplings, cipollini onions, maiitaki mushrooms, and preserved cherry broth) was perfectly cooked and delicious, and its lone duck-confit dumpling left us wanting more. This dish was followed by a lightly

tea-smoked loin of lamb (with Portobello hash, ruby chard, goat-cheese flan, and rosemary jus). Star-anise notes lent the earthy lamb exoticness, and gave the meal a welcome Asian vibe; its goat-cheese flan left us wanting another bite, a triumph in this marathon meal.

Desserts ranged from good to good-enough-to-fight-for. While we liked a tuile-wrapped chocolate gift that oozed warm chocolate and a tangy Meyer lemon tart, the crottin-shaped Alsatian cheesecake, dense yet fluffy, was stellar. We battled forks for that one.

There were some slips. An otherwise delicious halibut arrived disappointingly under-salted, though a textural marvel with creamy fish and crisply seared skin. And the sunchoke soup with sunchoke chip was creamy, hot, tasty—but so faintly flavored that it could have been made with anything. Also, the chip was missing.

Some of the Kittle House's waitstaff aren't as polished as those at other restaurants serving at this stratum, and this detracted from our dining experience. My beautiful salad of panko-crusted farm egg on asparagus purée with field greens with minted vinaigrette was referred to—un-ironically—as “egg salad,” while our sommelier's introduction to the extraordinary wines seemed alternately rote or brusque. And, though earnest, some of our waiters were unintelligible when introducing the complex dishes they were serving. Throughout, we felt food and wine this great deserves better ambassadorship.

The Kittle House's décor and service are joined by other idiosyncratic choices. For instance, the Kittle House's tavern often features live musicians, which one overhears while dining. The tavern is fun and relaxed, but in the context of a fine-dining meal, its music feels less than elegant.

Still, Crabtree's food was almost uniformly excellent, and its wine pairings extraordinary. The Kittle House offers extreme value, too. Our generous tasting menu with all those great wines cost only \$115, a steal in the fine-dining arena. Yet those who'd rather spend their dining dollar on water walls and snazzy bathrooms will be disappointed: this is not a jaw-dropping space manned by poised, out-of-work actors. The choice is yours, though we'll always opt for extra-ordinary food and wine over capped teeth and glitz.