

Yankee Doodle Tap Room

Servings here are generous, the food is hearty and the rathskeller atmosphere is delightful

By Kate and Tom O'Neill

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CHANGE comes slowly to the Yankee Doodle Tap Room, where we have been dropping in for more than 40 years. The bar, with its well-known Norman Rockwell mural of Yankee Doodle riding on a pony, was moved to the middle of the room during a renovation several years ago. Last year, five large screen HDTVs were installed near the bar, where they hang incongruously close to the magnificent stone fire place. Another recent and notable addition is the photo of Michelle Obama among the senior pictures of other eminent Princeton graduates — Donald Rumsfeld, Ralph Nader, Bill Bradley — that decorate one wall.

The Tap Room retains its delightful rathskeller atmosphere. The dark oak tables are interlaced with initials or graduation years carved by generations of students. (Carving on the tables is now discouraged to preserve the old ones, but couples who become engaged here can arrange to have a small plaque affixed to the booth where the question was popped.) Copper chandeliers, russet floor tiles, dark wood beams and paneling, and stone arches all appear far older than they are and give the room a burnished atmosphere. (The Nassau Inn opened in the late '30s, but carries on the name of an 18th century predecessor.)

The menu offers a solid list of generally well-prepared choices that are based on — but occasionally surpass — straightforward pub food. It is a casual dining menu, much of which goes well with beer, and Yuengling is featured among the dozen or so brews on tap.

Soups include French onion, served with bagel chips and melted Swiss cheese, and New England clam chowder. The appetizer list runs from crispy fried calamari with marinara sauce through baked brie with grapes, almonds and crackers, to spinach dip served in a bread bowl with tri-colored chips. Three salads are listed, including Caesar, with romaine, radicchio, croutons and Locatelli cheese.

Entrées include both grilled items (maple glazed salmon, burgers, or a balsamic chicken breast on a Kaiser roll with roasted red peppers, mozzarella and basil) and slightly more ambitious dishes such as vegetarian penne pasta with arugula, garlic, tomatoes, basil and capers or beer-braised beef brisket served with caramelized onions and cheddar cheese on sourdough bread. Servings are generous and the food hearty enough to keep you warm in the stands through the first half of a November football game. On weekends, the tap room serves all day long, from early morning until 10 at night.

Among the appetizers, the black bean soup-of-the-day (\$3.75/cup) was made for a cold winter's night with a fire in the hearth — warming, sweet and flavorful, with onions dense among the earthy black beans, smoothed by dollops of sour cream. It was satisfying and completely in sync with the stick-to-the-ribs menu. The chicken quesadilla (\$11) would have done for four, but tasted good enough to justify having one more slice. Scored with grill marks, the tortilla that enveloped the chicken breast, black beans, tomato, and cheddar cheese was fresh, delicate and crinkly. It was served with sour cream and salsa, which appeared and tasted bottled although our server assured us that it was fresh and made in the kitchen.

Entrees were presented simply and attractively on a big white plate flecked with minced parsley. Topped by an impressive dome of cheddar-laced crust, the large chicken pot pie (\$15) was served in a ramekin. Beneath the rich and flaky crust, chunks of chicken breast were supported by carrots, celery and red bliss potatoes, all in home-style gravy. Maple-syrup-glazed salmon (\$20), from the grill menu, was served atop a dozen or so sautéed asparagus spears and mashed potatoes. The salmon, marked with the grill pattern, was sweet and savory on its soft pillow of mashed potatoes. Cajun ribeye (\$24) is described on the menu as "blackened," but, we were told, after being pan seared with a coating of spices, it is finished on the grill. This steak is a big, hearty, tender piece of meat with a piquant accent added by a dramatic zigzag of creamy Dijon horseradish aioli. The accompanying asparagus were perhaps too al dente and over-salted, but the creamy, lumpy, homestyle mashed potatoes were entirely wonderful.

Desserts reflect the same character as the rest of the menu — big, bold and casual. Feather-light and not oversweet, chocolate banana bread pudding (\$9) is served warm with chocolate sauce on top, banana sauce on the side and a generous scoop of vanilla ice cream. That was not true of the berry cobbler (\$9), also served warm with vanilla ice cream. Although the blueberries were tart, this dessert was too sweet. Also available are chocolate pecan pie and apple crisp, both served warm with vanilla ice cream.

Service was efficient and considerate. Our server clearly knew the details of the menu and gave her impression of the choices available. Her description of the wine choices was informative, and she brought a taste of the Mason Sauvignon Blanc (\$8) that she had recommended before pouring a glass. The Chalone Cabernet Sauvignon (\$8.50) paired well with the ribeye. While specials are added to the bill of fare almost daily, the basic menu in the tap room changes about twice a year, with the next one due in April.



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