

Stockbridge: Red Lion Inn  
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Special to The Eagle

STOCKBRIDGE -- A cookout at the Red Lion Inn for \$25? I had to see if the event held Tuesday evenings in the courtyard was worth it.

After making reservations and being washed out two weeks in a row, several friends and I finally arrived at the inn on a recent Tuesday.

I called more than once to confirm our reservations and check on the weather but when we presented ourselves they could not find our names. No matter. The friendly, professional young staff seated us immediately.

Since we came early, we had a choice of round tables under umbrellas anywhere in the tree-sheltered courtyard -- anywhere, that is, except near the grill, a space reserved for the bar. Odd, on grill night.

Still, we sat where we could watch the scene, see and hear the acoustic guitarist and singer Dan Reed and still have privacy because of the generous space between tables.

One of our party thought that while the live music was nice, it would be better to have only the guitarist whose music would have been less intrusive to conversation than a singer.

It really did feel like an elegant -- not fussy or overdone -- backyard party. I felt like we were in an Impressionist painting in modern dress. Even before we ordered I knew I was going to have a good time.

Our waitress was pleasant and efficient. She wore a brass pin with her name but did not start off with: "Hello, I'm x-y-z and I'll be your server tonight." I hope that insincere tradition has been left in the last century.

She gave us each three menus: the courtyard cookout, the courtyard and the indoor dining room, plus a small book size wine list.

I was deciding between two acceptable pinot grigios -- one fruitier, one drier -- which the waitress brought me to sample when The Fussy Diner among us ordered a Belgian beer (\$3.81) with which he was very happy. That reminded me that barbecue and grill go best with beer so I got a Berkshire Brewery Steel Ale on tap (\$4.52). It was a perfect choice. And our waitress did not mutter at me for trying the wines.

The cookout includes an entree of either grilled steak with a sauce, marinated chicken breast or fish; seasonal vegetables; a salad; dessert; and coffee or tea.

The sauces, dressings, fish, vegetables, salad and dessert are different each week. Among this summer's fish have been salmon, swordfish, tilapia and trout.

Desserts have included fresh fruit with Berkshire Ice Cream, rice pudding, apple crisp and chocolate cake.

After we ordered, I walked over to see the enormous grill. It looked like a musical instrument.

I watched chef Jaime Finn, a small young woman in a chef's coat and low toque, tend the steaks, seafood brochettes and -- unfortunately skinless and boneless -- plump chicken breasts, plus the thinner-than-a-pencil asparagus laid at a right angle directly on the grill. It was pretty impressive.

Finn turned the asparagus with her tongs to achieve flavor-in-the-round -- at which she succeeded. and did not lose a spear, as I might have to the one-inch spaces between the grill bars.

Our salads came without the expected shaved radish and cucumber. It was merely lettuce with a few shredded carrots. The kitchen sent the radishes when I asked.

I liked the maple-Dijon vinaigrette. The Fussy Diner got lemon wedges and olive oil.

One of our party ordered salmon over fresh corn-off-the-cob with shiitake mushrooms (\$14) from the indoor tavern menu. She was delighted with it and the chopped Caesar salad including anchovy bits (\$6.50) she ordered.

I found it the least interesting of our dinners. The salmon tasted fishy. The corn kernels were too soft and too salty.

The Fussy Diner ordered the seafood brochette of scallops, shrimp and tuna. It was outstanding. The simple smoky flavor infused all the seafood and the quality and freshness of the tuna made its rare-to-almost-sashimi-rawness irresistible to me and to The Fussy Diner.

My steak came blackened and rare almost to cool inside -- as I ordered. I always order beef rare, but almost never get it, so this in itself was wonderful. The meat was lean and boneless.

I would have enjoyed a bit of charred fat and some bone, but it was tender, not mushy, not stringy and flavorful in itself, not from a marinade. It was the best steak I've had for years -- including my own at home.

The sauced, barbecued onion and garlic garnish was crisp and rich. I wish there had been more of it. The asparagus I watched being grilled were still firm. Even the small grilled red potatoes were wonderful -- enhanced by the smokiness.

Many times potatoes served in restaurants taste as if they had been boiled before being grilled or fried or baked. If these were, they did not taste it.

The two of us who devoured the cookout dessert -- a rich, bittersweet chocolate trifle topped with unsweetened whipped cream as thick as butter that the kitchen invented that day -- all but licked the stemmed glasses it came in.

I noticed well scraped glasses on the tables near us as well.

Our regular and decaf coffees were brewed strong from good beans and were worth drinking -- often not the case even in fine restaurants.

Even The Fussy Eater approved of the double espresso (\$5) and the Red Lion's signature fresh pineapple upside down cake (\$6.50).

I had to stab my fork into the cake fast to get a taste. Individually baked, it was lovely to look at and incredibly good, even better than homemade, which is difficult.

Were the consistently high quality of the coffees and scrumptious, grownup desserts the work of new Executive Chef Brian Alberg? If so I look forward to more.

Was the cookout worth it? Absolutely. I'd go again any nice Tuesday.

And I recommend you do too before the season is over. And next season, as well.

#### Restaurant Review

The Red Lion Inn Courtyard, 30 Main St., Stockbridge. Phone: (413) 298-5545 Hours: Tuesday evenings only from 5 to 9, weather permitting; as soon as it becomes warm enough in spring until around Labor Day

Style : Casual dress-up

Prices : \$24.95 prix fixe for cookout. Items from outdoor and indoor menus also available.

Wine and beer : Large interesting selection including local and foreign beers, some on tap, and an extensive, award-winning wine list both domestic and imported.

Handicapped accessible

Noise level: Rustling leaves and acoustic music. You can easily hear conversation at your own table and just a hum of that at other tables.

Bathrooms: Inside the inn; many, spotless, charming, fresh.

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