

Stockbridge: A Red Lion tradition
By Leslie Teicholz
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Waitress Kathy Conlin holds a traditional Thanksgiving turkey dinner served at the Red Lion Inn. Photos: Ben Garver / Berkshire Eagle Staff

The Red Lion Inn boasts the best porch in the Berkshires as well as the most welcoming lobby, but until Brian Alberg came aboard this year as executive chef, its food left a lot to be desired. All that has changed. The menu is mostly new, and the food is quite good -- worthy of the relatively high prices you can expect to pay for a dinner.

The dining room evokes visions of another era. It is quite large, and if there are only a few guests dining, you can feel like a time traveler to an abandoned old English inn.

The Red Lion Inn has been operating continuously since 1773, which is an admirable claim, and at first glance, you might think that nothing has changed. The dining room is filled with Staffordshire china, Colonial pewter and 18th-century furniture. The white-clothed tables are illuminated with soft candlelight and dressed with fresh flowers.

Although there is no longer a dress code requiring jackets and ties, many of the guests are well-dressed. Sneakers and jeans are not allowed.

To many, the Old World stateliness of the dining room is romantic and nostalgic. To this writer, however, what matters is the food -- which is excellent.

Chef Alberg's inaugural autumn menu focuses on fresh, local ingredients such as root vegetables (in Grilled Pork Tenderloin with Roasted Root Vegetable Hash), cranberries (in Tossed Salad with Pepitas and Dried Cranberries) and tomatoes (in Soupe du Poisson in a Shellfish Tomato Broth).

The ambitious menu has something for everyone, from a vegetarian grilled vegetable and goat cheese lasagna (not exactly Atkins fare but wonderfully creamy and zippy, thanks to the goat cheese) to the porcini grilled New York strip steak (for those allergic to vegetables).



Long table set for dinner at the Red Lion dining room.

The inn, known for comfort food, will still please those in search of it; they may be even more content with the new regime in the kitchen. The traditional roasted native turkey is better than anything I've ever cooked at home.

Tomorrow, Alberg and his team expect to prepare 540 Thanksgiving dinners. That's a daunting task, but they're pros, and if they do it with the same expertise they show the rest of the year, the meal should be superb.

As of this writing, they are fully booked, but cancellations are still possible.

The prix-fixe dinner includes a choice of New England clam chowder, butternut squash and apple bisque, sage cavetelli with zucchini and wild mushrooms or smoked duck breast with maple-dijon puree.

A tossed field green salad with dried cranberries is offered next, and you have a choice of turkey, prime rib, pan-seared Atlantic salmon or goat cheese ravioli for your entree.

We dined there on a Monday night with only four other people in the dining room. We had to laugh when the maitre d' asked if we had a reservation.

Needless to say, the service was excellent. The wine is generously poured, and the choices, with the new sommelier, are very good. Out of the inn's 3,500-bottle cellar, we chose a relatively rich-bodied, deeply colored Rosemont merlot that any serious oenophile would never pair with poached salmon. It was delicious, nonetheless.

If the scallop salad is offered as an appetizer, it's a must. A handful of sautéed scallops sit atop frisée and watercress greens with slightly marinated yellow and red grape tomatoes and widely shaved parmesan.

Less successful was the overly acidic baby spinach salad with grilled portabello mushrooms, broken blue cheese and roasted peppers in a balsamic vinaigrette.

It has been my theory that the only way to make polenta palatable is to incorporate either gobs of butter or spoonfuls of cream. Not so here. Alberg uses a fine-grained white corn meal that ab-sorbs the rich vegetable stock, then finishes it with truffle oil.

Monkfish (the poor man's lobster) was the main player in the soupe de poisson entree. Mussels, string beans and tomatoes are floating in a rich shellfish broth that is as good aromatically as it is to taste.

Surprisingly, the turkey dinner was worthy of its reputation. (According to our server, it's the most popular menu item.)

The mashed sweet potatoes were neither too sweet nor lumpy. The turkey was tender, the broccolini perfectly al dente and the cranberry sauce, tart and tasty.

One complaint: The gravy had too much salt.

It seemed fitting to order the Red Lion Apple Pie for dessert. It is touted as a classic and is served warm with Berkshire vanilla ice cream. Although the ice cream was excellent, we found the pie a disappointment with its soft crust and pallid apple filling. We should have listened to our server, who touted the pumpkin creme brulee and flourless chocolate torte as her favorites.

The Red Lion Inn has always been a storied landmark in the Berkshires, despite its cuisine. Now, with Alberg on board, it might be a worthy culinary destination as well.

Restaurant Review

The Red Lion Inn, Main Street, Stockbridge. Tel. 413-298-5545

Style: Upscale New England cuisine

Dress: No sneakers or blue jeans in the main dining room

Prices: First course: \$6 to \$13; main course: \$22 to \$32. House wines: \$6 to \$8. Desserts: \$6 to \$7.50.

Smoking: No smoking

Hours: Lunch: seven days a week, noon to 2:30. Dinner: 5:30 to 9:30 Monday through Thursday; 5:30 to 10 Friday and Saturday

Reservations: Requested

Credit cards: All major

Wheelchair-accessible: Ramp in rear

Noise level: Quiet