



## Dining Out: Mill's Tavern in Providence

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By Michael Janusonis

PROVIDENCE — Almost from the day it opened nine years ago in the old Pilgrim Mills Building, Mill's Tavern has been a star of the Rhode Island restaurant scene, winning many accolades along the way and even appearing in a movie — "27 Dresses" (although it was supposed to be a restaurant in Manhattan).

During that nearly decade-long run, there have been several highly praised chefs in the open kitchen, the fire in its wood-burning oven blazing. Good news: Rob Harrison, who was the chef here for more than a year, recently returned after four-and-a-half months away, and his menu, in collaboration with sous chef Edward Bolus, is a reflection of the care that goes into creating an award-winning dining experience. His inventiveness shows in such pairings as calamari with baby artichokes, cherry peppers and spinach; Idaho trout wrapped in bacon; and lasagna of braised rabbit with spring vegetables. Indeed, when my dining companion's breast of veal arrived, I mistook the semolina gnocchi for a pair of thick slices of potato.

Although the vaulted ceiling, dark woods, hurricane-lamp chandeliers and tables covered in heavy linens give the look of subdued sophistication, the giant fork hanging above the stainless steel kitchen and the friendly staff make one feel right at home. Service is efficient without being obtrusive. Water glasses were refilled almost without notice. And our cheerful and knowledgeable waiter, Eric, who seemed to have tried everything on the menu, guided us through it and answered questions promptly.



Chef Rob Harrison is back after a four-month absence.

The signature Millsberry Martini (\$9), with its infusions of several berries, was a fruity start; my Harbor Town Sauvignon Blanc (\$9) from New Zealand was a perfect, light accompaniment to the tuna I later ordered.

Pizzas are always a popular starter, so who could resist Mill's wood-fired one (\$13.50) topped with lamb sausage, roasted eggplant purée, yellow tomatoes and toasted Sardinian ricotta? I'm not a big fan of lamb, but with the herbs mixed into the sausage it was similar to Italian sausage yet had a decidedly stronger pull. The eggplant purée slathered on top of the thick, bready dough and topped with the ricotta offered a milder contrast. The yellow tomatoes added sweetness with just a hint of tanginess.

The littlenecks braised in a smoked tomato and Narragansett Lager broth (\$15) had sautéed onions and fairly big slices of grilled chorizo, recalling the Portuguese-inspired "zuppa" that is a favorite summer dish. This dish "has been on the menu since Day One" one of the Mill's staffers said, and I could see why. I love the slight bite of the chorizo versus the sweet clams, a wonderful blend of flavors with two large slices of grilled garlic bread on the side, perfect for sopping up the broth. It seemed mild at first, but when the clams were gone and I dipped the ladle in to get every last drop, the broth's smokiness was more apparent.

My two large slices of yellowfin tuna (\$26) were a perfect medium rare, with a pink center, its wonderfully crunchy crust of cardamom adding a sweet-spicy sassiness to the fish. The slices of baby artichokes on the side had been grilled to a wonderful crunchiness, too, along with sweet, olive oil-poached cherry tomatoes. Caper aioli on the side afforded a slightly pungent contrast to the fish.

New on the current spring menu, the breast of veal in Bock beer (\$25) had a heady flavor, probably thanks to the beer, with a richness found in prime aged beef. The semolina gnocchi on the side made one forget the more traditional little dumplings, the two thick rounds having a crisp crust and mellow center that picked up the flavors of the sauce. On the side was a ragout of English peas, spring onions and fava beans, so good that it made me take back everything bad I've ever said about fava beans.

Although there was plenty on the plates, we ventured into the side dishes, each of which Eric said would be enough for two people. Actually, each could easily have served four, with the mashed carrots and sweet potato (\$6.75) deliciously rich and the variety of pan-roasted mushrooms (\$8.75) with Marsala and thyme soy sauce providing a hearty duskiness.

Desserts were equally sumptuous. The "warm chocolate cake" (\$8.25) turned out to be the Mill's Tavern version of a lava cake, with hot, fudgy chocolate spewing out when cut and a small scoop of soothing vanilla bean ice cream on the side. The crème brulee was truly "classic," as the menu had promised, its mild creamy custard topped with a brittle burnt-sugar top and that topped with a star-shaped shortbread cookie with strawberry-rhubarb jam filling. What a sweet surprise. I would have been happy with the cookie all by itself.

Mill's Tavern, 101 North Main St., Providence. (401) 272-3331  
millstavernrestaurant.com. Dressy. Wheelchair accessible. Child seats. Reservations. AE, DIS, M, V. Valet and on-street parking. Hours: 5 to 10 p.m. Mon. to Thurs; to 11 p.m. Fri. and Sat.; 4 to 9 p.m. Sun. Appetizers \$12 to \$18. Entrees \$19 to \$39.75, with a \$29.95 three-course menu available. Wines are \$8.75 to \$10.25 by the glass; \$31 to \$99 for a bottle. BILL OF FARE

Dinner for two at Mill's Tavern might look something like this:

Harbor Town Sauvignon Blanc...\$9.00

Millsberry Martini...\$9.00

Braised Little necks...\$15.00

Yellowfin Tuna...\$26.00

Veal in Bock Beer...\$25.00

Crème Brulee...\$8.25

Total food and drink...\$92.25

Tax...\$7.38

Tip...\$18.00

Total bill...\$117.63

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