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Dining review: Hawks restaurant a Granite Bay treasure

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Published Sunday, Feb. 19, 2012

To be a great restaurant is a complex equation.

You take 4,650 square feet, with seating for 125 guests. Bring together with great care a staff of about 30 – five cooks, four chefs, two bartenders, eight servers, five assistant servers, three dishwashers and two managers.

The restaurant is open 10-plus hours a day. The cooks come in five hours before service and leave two hours after closing time. It has four menus going at any one time.

These are some of the components that constitute Hawks, which is owned by the husband-and-wife team of Molly Hawks and Michael Fagnoni.

Hawks is a great restaurant. Is it the best in the Sacramento area?

I visited this Granite Bay treasure over a period of several months, looking for answers to that weighty question.

I expected professionalism and choreographed precision from the staff, complete with the little details that contribute so much to a restaurant experience at this level. The staff exceeded those expectations.

So did the food, which on the menu looks rather straightforward, if not a tad timid. It is anything but. The ingredients are first-rate, the techniques are wide-ranging, the execution consistently at a high level. This is new American cooking, mixing rustic elements with refined, and employing classical methods based on French and Italian cuisines.

The flavors and the combinations on the plate are broad, focused, often beautiful and, in the case of one dessert involving what I thought would be a German chocolate cake, show touches of edgy, elegant brilliance.

If we could point to a potential shortcoming on the road to further greatness, it would be the limitations of the menu, the missing elements – and ingredients – that would bring more daring to the cooking and a more challenging edge to the dining experience.

That's where the restaurant's guests have to play a role. Are they willing to support risk? Will they order food that might take them into uncharted territory?

I went looking for mistakes, too, the kind of missteps, errors in judgment, inaccurate cooking or clumsy personal interactions that might sour an experience.

The bread. Surely it was going to be a little thing like the bread. One night, we were down to our last slice. The restaurant was very busy. The butter was half gone. Then in swoops an assistant waiter who whisks away the basket and drops off more bread. He didn't ask. He just knew. It's that kind of anticipation, little by little, that adds up to great service.

Great service is the bread. It also is the doggie bag left with the host at the front – the host who smiled and handed us the bag as we walked to the door. It's the small sampling of soup I didn't order. It's the waiter who can talk about the finer points of chablis on a Sunday and another waiter who can explain why he suggested a cabernet sauvignon to go with the excellent short rib dish.

OK, so maybe the timing would be off. I ordered separate items from the menu while my significant other got the multicourse prix fixe from the "Signature" menu – a collection of longtime house favorites. Then she asked for the wine pairings, while I got my own glass of something French and red.

There's no way a busy restaurant can handle this, I thought. Yet, course after course, the timing was perfect – and the pairings came with unhurried insights and explanations from the personable Matthew Walker, the general manager who doubles as the sommelier.

Another time, we sat at the bar – and ordered food and drinks. I ordered all-American – a burger medium-rare, and it was one of the best burgers I've ever had, with a brioche bun baked in-house. Another visit I ordered something French – boeuf bourguignon – and got classic technique with a twist: short ribs braised in sweated onions for eight hours, delivering meat that was deep in flavor and delicate in mouthfeel. It was an exceptional dish.

We went the Italian route, too, with a rustic plate of cavatelli pasta and lobster, with more deeply realized flavors that soothed. Then there was the plate of gnocchi with mushrooms and parmesan cream that was so subtle. All of it was fresh and made in-house.

We loved the wild mushroom soup one evening and, within minutes, Walker returned with an envelope. Inside was the recipe. On Hawks stationery.

We had fish on a Sunday, when the restaurant goes into a casual, family-supper mode – simplicity without sacrificing quality. On a chilly, wind-swept evening in early winter, the experience made one of the most pleasing and poignant statements about seasonality of any meal in recent memory.

It started with a simple salad with preserved lemon vinaigrette and shavings of Parmigiano-Reggiano, followed by a purée of cauliflower soup with shrimp and spiced oil that offered nuanced and balanced flavors. And then came the fish, a fillet of rock cod, glistening and plump, plated with butternut squash and braised cabbage.

The finishing touch was the dessert – a walnut streusel cake with toffee sauce and vanilla bean gelato. By the time we finished, the meal felt like a big, thick sweater on our shoulders as we headed into the cold. And this was the prix fixe Sunday supper, the simplest of ways to dine here – and a bargain at \$35.

We had braised pork cheeks on a Saturday, a dish that combines the full flavor and tenderness of the pork with a sharp surprise – biting into the wilted braised kale that had such lively (and pleasing) bitter notes to balance the richness elsewhere on the plate. What a great dish, and another strong statement about seasonal cooking.

As Fagnoni told me later by phone, "We try to just do honest food, and cook in the season when things are at their peak."

With its fine staff, meticulous training and attention to detail from kitchen to dining room, Hawks is doing enough to be considered the best restaurant we've got.

Even more impressive, there's room for improvement.

Hawks

5530 Douglas Blvd., Granite Bay

(916) 791-6200

www.hawksrestaurant.com

Hours: Dinner 5-9 p.m. Tuesday to Thursday, 5-10 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 5-9 p.m. Sunday; lunch, 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Tuesday to Friday; brunch, 10:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. (second Sunday each month)

Full bar? Yes.

Takeout? Yes.

Vegetarian friendly? Yes.

Overall: 4 stars (excellent)

Here's a restaurant that demonstrates great teamwork and precision at the front of the house and exhibits great talent and dedication in the kitchen. It deserves to be considered the best restaurant in the Sacramento area.

Food: 4 stars (excellent)

Nearly everything in the restaurant is made in-house. The focus is seasonal. The execution is as precise and consistent as any restaurant around. Top dishes include the short ribs, braised pork cheeks, gnocchi with parmesan cream, and the lobster cavatelli. Even the burger and pan-roasted chicken are superb. Don't miss the desserts, especially the creative take on German chocolate cake. The wine list is extensive, with options at various price points, though a broader range of bottles \$30 and less would be appreciated.

Service: 4 stars (excellent)

There are a half-dozen restaurants in the area with national-caliber service. This is the best of the best. They know their stuff, they work as a team and their timing is impeccable.

Ambience: 4 stars (excellent)

The room is upscale and modern without feeling overstylized. The energy is lively. The lighting is dim enough for a romantic night out. Just be sure to get a table that's not next to four brokers discussing interest rates.

Value: 3 1/2 stars (very good)

How can you justify prices in which many main entrees are in the high 20s to mid-30s? Hawks doesn't cut corners and doesn't skimp on ingredients. The food is incredibly fresh and cooked with skill. The great service adds value, too.

Noteworthy: If you want to cook the Hawks way, get on the email list and sign up for a monthly cooking class. For \$100, you learn to cook three to four dishes, then sit down to a three-course lunch with wine pairings.

Expect big things from 26-year-old pastry chef Edward Martinez, whose creative desserts combine modernist and classic techniques to arrive at new takes on old favorites.

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