

REVIEW

Pleasant atmosphere, fine food found at Ventura's Offshore

By SARA RIORDAN Press Restaurant Critic

NORTHFIELD — When the old Rugby Inn became Ventura's Offshore Cafe three years ago, many locals were heartbroken.

The Rugby had classic neighborhood-bar appeal. It was dark, cozy, familiar, quiet and

CORNER TABLE

Ventura's Offshore Cafe 2015 Shore Road Northfield

- Phone: 641-5148
Hours: Lunch served at 11 a.m.; dinner served until about 10 p.m.

NOTES

- Liquor license: Yes
Major credit cards accepted
Disabled access: Yes
Reservations not accepted
Entrees \$12.95 to \$21.95, salads about \$6.95
Nonsmoking section: Yes

spaciousness, lazily turning fans, and booths separated by softly etched glass panels. Intimacy and privacy are maintained despite the wide-open setting.

A towering brick fireplace dominates the main dining room and can be seen from the bar area. Wood and brick provide warmth and comfort, a color scheme of natural tones and forest green provides a soothing atmosphere.

But the best part is the fine food Ventura's serves.

inviting. It had aging barstools at a weathered bar, sloping floors and ancient bathrooms. Soldierly rows of dusty cordials stood behind the bar year after year. It wasn't glamorous. It was comfortable and predictable.

And then the Rugby became Ventura's Offshore Cafe.

The building has been totally remodeled. There are lofty ceilings for

We began our meal with an order of mussels and an antipasto. The mussels were a gargantuan serving of steaming hot, plump, fresh mussels bathed in an abundantly garlicky white sauce. Mussels are often gritty and spoil quickly, so they have to be handled properly, cleaned carefully and turned over quickly. Somebody at Ventura's obviously knows that because these mussels were perfect — silky and mild and full of fresh briny flavor.

The antipasto, equally enormous, included crisp greens, black olives, provolone cheese and traditional salamis. Antipasto isn't exotic; unless the ingredients are fresh and the presentation is appealing, it is dull and ordinary. This wasn't.

Next, we tried a portabello mushroom offered as an appetizer special. It was stuffed with a mixture of peppery broccoli rabe, sundried tomato and chewy pine nuts, an intriguing combination that lived up to our expectations. In fact, the meaty mushroom would have been a satisfying entree on its own.

The measure of a fine restaurant is its attention to details like serving ripe tomatoes. Most don't. At Ventura's, the tomatoes are ripe and flavorful. Milano salad was a mixture of baby lettuces, ripe plum tomatoes and fresh mozzarella, lavished with an herbed balsamic vinaigrette. The combination of perfumy tomato and tender mozzarella made me long for summer.

My friend insisted on trying the steak, a tender filet mignon that arrived on a bed of sautéed mushrooms, carrots and peppers atop spiky asparagus. The steak was crowned with three piping hot and gloriously crispy

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onion rings. My partner declared it one of the best steaks he's ever eaten.

The pasta entrees offered a choice of cappellini, linguine or penne to soak up the marvelous sauces. I chose Pasta Danielle — five perfectly cooked shrimp, fresh spinach, roasted peppers and a sauce rosa. This is a lovely pink sauce, lighter than alfredo and milder than traditional marinara, but marrying elements of each and complementing the sweet roasted peppers and firm shrimp.

Another outstanding treat is the basket of fresh sub bread that arrives with salad. It has two kinds of foccacia as well, a salty rosemary and garlic wedge, and a chewy, fresh plum tomato-topped slice. Any restaurant can put fresh bread on the table, but the extra effort that went into this selection deserves praise.

Espresso, cappuccino may be on the way

Service was brisk, friendly and professional. Our only disappointment was that espresso and cappuccino were not available, but our server said that these may be available in the future.

Desserts change often, so no menu was available. At our visit, a vanilla creme brulee with fresh blueberries and a banana chip cheesecake were featured.

For those interested in lighter fare, an assortment of burgers and sandwiches are available, as well as a number of pizzas.

Though locals will reminisce fondly about the old Rugby, the truth is they're already quite enamored of the new Ventura's, as is evidenced by the full parking lot even in the dead of winter. The updated setting and consistently terrific food make Ventura's a year-round winner.

(Sara Riordan is the pseudonym of a former caterer and cooking instructor from New Jersey.)