

# Philadelphia vibe works for Next Oar

**By C.C.HOYT**

Atlantic City Press Restaurant Critic

MILLVILLE—The Next Oar brought back wonderful memories of the storefront boutique restaurants that started in downtown Philadelphia more than 30 years ago.

We loved the individuality, style, simplicity and food of the restaurants then.

We liked the Next Oar place as soon as we saw the façade and the two benches outside, one wooden, one stone, with beautiful yellow chrysanthemums all around.

Menu choices are heavy on seafood and shellfish — seven out of eight appetizers and 14 out of 22 entrees feature something from the ocean. How bad can that be? On the down side, our server read the daily specials, but alas, prices were not included in the litany.

We were served triangles of a foccacialike bread studded with herbs and chunks of sun dried tomato hot from the oven with a plate of olive oil and herbs for dipping. Maybe the best bread we have sampled in ages. Crisp on the outside, chewy on the inside.

We began on an unfortunate note—the six clams on the half shell (\$5) arrived on ice with all the trimmings, lemon wedges and cocktail sauce, but had the look of being opened too far ahead. They were still stuck to the bottom shell where much of the meat remained along with some pieces of grit. So much for the raw bar.

The hot appetizers more than made up for that first little stumble. Prosciutto prawns (\$12) looked big and tasted fresh. The white flesh had been marinated, butterflied and stuffed with spinach, then wrapped with thin slices of salty prosciutto, grilled and topped with a sprinkle of pecorino Romano cheese.

A sour cream and horseradish sauce was served with the shrimp. Simple, a little bit different and oh, so good. Mixed greens finished the dish. We definitely flipped for the panko encrusted crab cakes (\$10) also served with a mixed green salad and a spicy orange colored remoulade.

The two crab cakes were bound only by a rich mayonnaise base with specks of onion, red and green peppers and chives, coated in panko crumbs then sautéed, for what we thought was the perfect crab cake.

A salad course that comes with the meal had crisp pieces of romaine lettuce, slices of zucchini, croutons and a tomato wedge with a great tasting sweet and sour balsamic vinaigrette.

The plate and all the ingredients were properly chilled. Just enough to whet the appetite for the next course.

The menu offers two signature dishes: Next Oar Tournedos and Next Oar Crab. We decided to go crabbing. Next Oar crab (\$22) was a mix of lump crab meat, sautéed spinach, caramelized onions and roasted corn baked in a puff pastry package and finished with a citrus beurre blanc.

The citrus beurre blanc had a sweet component like orange juice rather than lemon that balanced nicely with the savory seafood concoction.

We also loved the Veal & Lobster Aurora (\$25) composed of medallions of tender veal and a half of a lobster tail both sautéed and served with a lightly creamed tomato sauce garnished with slices of Portobella mushrooms. An interesting combination of tastes and textures. Both plates were served with good mashed potatoes that were less than warm. A fresh pencil-thin asparagus, carrot and red onion medley was unseasoned, and the asparagus were too tough to eat any where below the tips. Not good.

We considered desserts over good coffee.

The caramel apple pie (\$6.), which was homemade and sweet, sat on a sunburst of chocolate and caramel sauces on the plate. We liked the crust although it had too many layers on top under a dusting of ground nuts.

Inside were crisp apple slices with plenty of caramel. A lonely martini glass of premium vanilla ice cream (\$3.50) was much better when added to the plate with the apple pie. It is after all. A classic combination.

Bigger than a typical transposed Philadelphia row house, Next Oar features high ceilings with pressed tin roofs and heating vents all painted black so that the fixtures blend in and the bulbs appear as so many stars overhead.

Twinkle lights are wrapped around an oar and strategically place inside sculls overhead like a constellation of tiny stars. One full wall is composed of a hand-painted mural of Boat House Row, making yet another Philadelphia connection. Oversized modern art work offers just enough color to tie the atmosphere together.

The dark room has a romantic feel to it. Votive candles supply light to each table and a series of them along a stained wood wall illuminates the exposed original red brick.

Our server, dressed in basic black and tan, took great care of us, checking back from time to time, pacing the courses and refilling water.

The maitre'd was not nearly as friendly, failing to make eye contact with the diners as he walked through the dining room several times.

He also had the bad habit of seating new parties in a quiet dining room around each other, rather than spreading them out a little. It would have been a little more romantic for all.

On the way out we realized we had complete missed the neat little four-seat bar area with two café tables in the front window. A nice place to sip a drink and watch folks on the avenue.

We would return to the Next Oar in a heartbeat. Restaurants don't have to be perfect to be excellent.

*C.C. Hoyt is the pseudonym of a southern New Jersey writer with 35 years experience in the restaurant industry. You can write to Hoyt c/o Food Editor James Clark, The Press of Atlantic City, 11 Devins Lane, Pleasantville, N.J. 08232.*

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