



By Paul Clark

The Airmont site upon which Citrus Grille now sits has long been a spot where people have gathered to eat, drink and enjoy the company of others. A century and a half ago, according to manager Judi Christianson, the place was a tavern. Its close proximity to the road, especially one as long established and well traveled as Saddle River Road, would have made it a natural setting for something like that.

"The place has changed owners a few times over the years," she goes on to explain, "and as far as anyone can tell, there has always been a tavern or restaurant of some sort here. For the last 14 years, it has been the Citrus Grille."

Owned and managed by Steve and Judi Christianson, Citrus Grille preserves this spot's venerable spirit of hospitality in the form of a warm, welcoming restaurant specializing in a wonderfully adventurous mix of New American cuisine; a select, exceptional list of domestic and imported wines; and a surprising dessert or two.

The atmosphere within Citrus Grille's bar and comfortably proportioned dining room is light, friendly, and ideally suited for relaxed dining and conversation. Everything, from the calm, Caribbean-style colors on the walls to the radiant tones of the fire in the fireplace, make it all the more so. Even on a busy Saturday evening, the service provided by our waiter, Mauricio Aguilar, and everyone else from the owners on down, was helpful, knowledgeable and unhurried. Exactly the kind of setting that encourages you to sit back and settle in for a highly enjoyable dinner at a pace of your own choosing.

The food is creatively prepared and presented under the accomplished eye of the well rated and reviewed (*Zagat*, *New York Times* and others) Chef Steve Christianson. I and two dining companions were presented with a delightfully diverse selection of appetizers, regular main courses and special offerings to consider.

The choices are as remarkable as they are varied. And each sound better and more enticing than the next. Appetizers range from such colorfully prepared options as spiced pumpkin raviolis with brown sage butter, to a tempting tuna carpaccio with watercress salad, balsamic dressing



A venerable tradition of great American dining that just keeps getting better... Above: Citrus Grille's signature Pecan crusted chicken with dried fruit and orzo. Right: Panna cotta with strawberry compote, powdered sugar and mint. Photographs by JW



Chef Steve Christianson preparing one of his inventive New American creations.

Citrus Grille's warm, well-appointed bar and dining room are ideally suited for fine, relaxed dining and conversation with family and friends.

and sesame crackers. There's also bresaola "air dried beef" with arugula, aged pecorino white truffle oil and mushrooms, and chilled oysters with cucumber spaghetti, Champagne mignonette and tobiko caviar. Just to name a few.

mashed potatoes, thin green beans and garlic chips. It's every bit as colorful, exotic and delicious as it sounds.

Intrigued, however, by Mauricio's description of the special's wild boar tenderloins with mashed potatoes, sauerkraut and sliced garden vegetables, I had to give it try. Having never before tried boar, I was genuinely surprised by its beguiling tenderness and taste. It was, quite honestly, one of the most satisfying preparations I've ever experienced. From that moment on, I resolved never to look at a boar -- in any context -- the same way again.

An artfully presented panko crusted crab cake in a mild beet horseradish remoulade with freshly sliced greens and a peeled segment or two of orange was my choice. And if you regularly seek out and appreciate a fresh, inventive interpretation of the crab cake appetizer as much as I do, I highly recommend that you give this one a try.

The dessert choices were also eclectic and excellent. I chose panna cotta, a traditional Italian-style custard served in the shape of a heart, accompanied by a sweet strawberry compote and a softly sugared chocolate cookie. It was incredible, and plentiful enough to indulge the three of us.

Main courses included a pan-seared tilapia with lemon thyme glazed shallots, rock shrimp and capers; and roast loin of lamb with autumn vegetable hash in herbed mustard butter. Plus, a grilled Boston-cut sirloin with a roasted mushroom strudel in red wine sauce; or slow-roasted petite rack of veal with apples shallots, cognac and veal au jus accompanied by sweet potato pie.

True to the spirit of fine food and hospitality that continues to inspire it, Citrus Grille has proven to be a perfect place for an amazing choice of well-portioned, moderately priced New American cuisine. It's an exceptionally warm and gratifying spot to spend a relaxing evening with friends and everyone in the Lower Hudson Valley -- and beyond -- should certainly visit. And visit again.

The pecan crusted chicken with dried fruit and orzo is a Steve Christianson original, and Citrus Grille's signature specialty. It's delicately crunchy, and perfectly seasoned and matched to the sweetness of fruit and the texture of the pasta. Also worth considering is the sun dried tomato crusted salmon with black olive

Citrus Grille is located at 430 East Saddle River Road in Airmont. Open Tuesday through Sunday. Mondays are reserved for private parties. For reservations and additional information, call 845-352-5533 or www.thecitrusgrille.com