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ELEGANT FOOD AND DESIGN IN VERMONT'S MAD RIVER VALLEY

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The Pitcher Inn Photo by Emilie C. Harting

The front entrance of the Pitcher Inn hugs the side of the road on Main Street in the charming village of Warren, Vermont. Here the cadences of everyday life slow down. Often, the only sounds are the wrens and sparrows, the flow of the river behind the general store across the country lane, and the rustling of wind. David Sellars and a group of architects and designers have built an almost exact recreation of the old Warren Inn, which stood on the site until it was destroyed by

fire in the mid-1990s. I was there for two days before I knew that the inn was not the original structure, built around 1850, at a time when guests would step out of their carriages and walk directly onto the front porch to avoid dust and rain. The Warren General Store, the bakery, and several other white clapboard buildings across the street have also been restored, giving the village the feel of an earlier time.

At 275 Main, the inn's spacious restaurant, tables and colonial chairs are spread across the room so that diners cannot actually hear each other's conversations. A brick colonial fireplace with antique copper and iron pots, various turners, and stoking implements fills one wall. They are typical of the implements produced at mills in the Warren area during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. On a recent summer evening, the blend of light classical music, the soft buzz of attentive staff conversing with guests over food and wine choices, and the muted light of candles created an atmosphere of elegance.

General Manager Ari Sadri, who is also trained as a sommelier, moved around the dining room, conversing with guests. The inn has 600 bottles in the wine cellar and 1200 in storage. Sadri says that the wine program is deliberately eclectic, and thus they have wines from all over the world. He does not buy from big companies, but looks for older, generational, and artisanal wine makers so that guests, especially those who are wine connoisseurs, have the opportunity to experience something unique.

Since I am interested in how the pairing of food and wine enhances food's flavors, I put myself in Ari's hands rather than venturing out on my own. On one evening, he chose a sweet

red Montepulciano from Tuscany, which he advised was a mellow line between dry and sweet, and thus would go with our appetizers of garganelli, a combination of pasta with roasted tomatoes, capers and olives, and bucatini, a combination of mussels, tomatoes and chorizo. The bucatini was especially tasty because sweetness of the chorizo cancelled out the briny taste of the mussels and the slight tartness of the summer tomatoes. The entree of sautéed chicken with parmesan bread crumbs was tender and without a trace of graininess. And the vegetable and fish flavors in the sautéed wild striped bass with clams, mussels, roasted tomatoes, and olives were melded so well that there was not a trace of tartness coming through.

On another night, a white wine with golden highlights complemented our pasta dishes and the veal scallops with mushrooms, leeks, and marsala. The result was a sweet, mellow taste. In their salads, the flavors of tenderly cooked fresh summer vegetables mixed well with Italian and Vermont cheeses and local meat or fish brought in from Boston. Sue Schickler explains that the menu is basically American with an infusion of Italian and Spanish influences. “I really enjoy preparing the items on the menus. It’s fun and more casual than a strictly traditional cuisine, and we get lots of compliments from our guests. For each meal we have a pasta, steak and fish dish, so there are plenty of choices.” She says that in summer, they depend heavily on the excellent fresh produce and meats in the Mad River Valley, which have their own succulent flavors. In winter she uses more root vegetables and spices.

Creamy polenta was one of the most memorable dishes because of its smooth and delicate flavor, which she says was made with marscarpone, a relatively low-fat triple-creme Italian cream cheese from Lombardy. “It’s the same cheese that is used in tiramisu, except that in Tiramisu the eggs make it lighter.” Schickler’s gift with cheeses was also evident in the breakfast omelet with goat cheese, fresh Vermont heirloom tomatoes, and basil.

When I told her the marinated beets seemed a perfect line between sweetness and tartness, Chef Schickler told me they were marinated with vinegar, sugar, and tarragon. “Guests love them. We make up a huge batch at a time. The beets, along with beef carpaccio salad with lemon dressed arugula and parmigiano reggiano are frequently requested by returning diners.”

Because we ate there in August when local produce was at its prime, our salads contained fresh eggplant, escarole, arugula, peppers and heirloom tomatoes. In the evening our appetizers often had corn, leeks and peppers, which had been marinated so that subtle flavors emerged.

Between breakfast and lunch, there was plenty of time to take drives on some of the Mad River Valley’s most scenic roads. Ari Sadri directed us on an oval-shaped journey through the Mad River Valley, up Route 100 north to Waitsfield, where we stopped to visit The Store, a world class kitchen supply and antique store in a restored barn, the Mad River Glass Gallery, and Cabin River Quilts, both in the center of Waitsfield on Main Street. On our return, we drove south past breathtaking vistas of horse and dairy farms against the mountains.

On a late day stroll past the Warren’s cemetery and Town Hall, I met a guest from the Washington, D.C. area who comes here every year and never leaves the village. “Where ever could you find such a picture perfect place? It’s so restorative. For lunch all I need is a sandwich from the general store, and I eat it out on the deck overlooking the Mad River.” He

told me to come back to Warren for the best small town July 4th parade in New England. “Just make sure to stay in the Chester Arthur Room so that you get the best view.”

Each of the eleven rooms at the Pitcher Inn has a unique décor, and reflects everyday life in Vermont during past centuries. We stayed in The Lodge, which has a ceiling depicting stars on a Christmas night. The furniture, all hand hewn by noted designers, included a bed inspired by Cleopatra’s, and a fireplace with the triangular design of the Masons, who were important in small town Vermont life.

Throughout the halls owner Maggie Smith’s décor of Vermont antiques and early American landscape paintings makes one stop for reflection. I was delighted to learn that some characters in the paintings were gathered together over food.

Check out: www.pitcherinn.com for holiday packages. The inn is in the heart of the Mad River Valley ski country. Sugarbush Ski Resort is right down the road, and guests cross country ski at a nearby park. Not only is the inn a great place to spend a weekend, but the restaurant is open to outsiders, and the entire inn can be rented out for destination weddings and retreats.