



the republican

19 december 2002

agawam's federal offers 'edgy' menu

FRAN BELLAMY Union-News (Springfield, Mass.)

When they opened the Federal in May, Ralph Santaniello and Michael Presnal had a stated objective – creating the Springfield area's first "fine dining" restaurant. While there are those who'd contend that particular market niche wasn't exactly unpopulated, the Federal certainly did bring a new culinary style to the region.

Presnal, who's the restaurant's executive chef, has assembled a menu of "new American" that's one of the most innovative and downright "edgy" that we've encountered hereabouts.

Having refined his skills in several Nantucket and Vineyard high-end establishments, he, along with Santaniello, to whom he's related by marriage, has remodeled and reopened the former Federal Hill Club in Agawam.

Presnal's menu is an ambitious and sometimes brash romp through contemporary cooking. He's not the least afraid of combining ingredients in ways that fearlessly make light of culinary tradition.

Sometimes, however, he can get carried away; dinner at the Federal occasionally incorporates so much to see and taste that the senses get overloaded.

He also favors making little jokes with menu presentations, as exemplified by his "Potato Skins" (\$13.50). It's a starter that's nothing like its humbler cousins served elsewhere, since his "skins" are topped with smoked salmon, sour cream and a dab of caviar.

We were bowled over by his Foie Gras a la Mode (\$18), a first-course offering he serves with what he terms "deconstructed apple pie."

Fruit most assuredly goes with foie gras, but rarely has this delicacy been paired up with such boldly unconventional sidekicks. The meltingly smooth, pink-within liver came with a dessert-like trio of buttery caramelized apples, cinnamon gelato and caramel-walnut brittle.

Braised oxtail was the inspiration for an appetizer order of "Lumberjack Paul Bunyan's Ravioli" (\$13). The plump pasta pockets were stuffed with a rich, earthy mince of oxtail and roasted mushrooms; chips of pecorino cheese served as garnish.

Presnal's not shy about flaunting his obvious talents, either; he's in the habit of sending guests pre-dinner "amuse bouche," such as the tiny, one-bite risotto croquettes with which we were plied.



Veal cheeks are a delicacy that have only recently made their debut hereabouts; Presnal taps these succulent little morsels of meat for a starring role in a “TV Dinner Style” (\$25.50) presentation.

The sectioned china plate on which the meal is presented replicates a TV-dinner tray, the main compartment of which Presnal fills with veal cheeks. Succulent and meaty, with an interestingly melting texture, the cheeks are accompanied by “mac and cheese” made earthy-good with truffles as well as an order of “chips” that come from the Federal’s own kitchen.

Apparently not quite content to stop there, he encores with a parmesan fried egg – the yolk’s been removed and replaced with a savory center.

A serving of Burnt Tangerine Glazed Cod (\$24) represents, however, how creativity untempered by discipline can become counterproductive.

Magically dusted with a citrus essence, then pan-seared, the cod filet picked up a yummy citrus edge.

A dab of mint puree, however, seemed a bit much, overwhelming the cod’s delicacy, while robust ragout of braised artichokes and whole-clove garlic seemed more suited to slow-braised meats than to mild cod.

Unlike the standard practice hereabouts, salad isn’t offered with meals at the Federal, even though the kitchen does supply freshly baked bread and premium olive oil for drizzling onto it.

There’s also a first-rate wine list to explore; Santaniello, who acts as the restaurant’s wine director, has put together a selection that favors California and France.

The staff at the Federal is proud to point out that most everything is made “in house.” That’s certainly the case with desserts; part of the extensive renovations the Federal underwent included the installation of a bake shop. The dessert list includes the likes of Warm Honey-roasted Figs (\$10.50) served with handmade “fig newtons” and an “Apple Pie” Risotto (\$10) that’s plated with scoops of double-vanilla gelato.

The most delectable way, however, to close out a meal at the Federal is to opt for the Tier of Tiny Treats (\$17.50).

Presented on a multileveled stand of china and wrought iron, the “tier” incorporates nearly 20 miniature dessert delights, ranging from a shot-glass-portion of lemon sorbet to a hot berry cobbler presented in a pocket-watch-sized iron skillet.

Presnal’s apparently fond of chocolate, so that ingredient dominates the assortment. We loved a chocolate-banana mousse garnished with white-chocolate-dipped coffee beans; a four-bite portion of white-chocolate panna cotta (baked custard) was intensely perfumed with sweet vanilla fragrance.

Should you be inclined to “pass” on dessert, Santaniello is prepared to tempt with a list of premium single malts, ports and brandies.