



hartford courant

november 23, 2003

★★★★

fork on the left | michael gannon

drop everything and go to this restaurant.

I mean it. Forget what you're doing. Forget whatever you have planned for dinner tonight. Find a baby sitter for your children. And if you can't find a baby sitter, just leave them home alone. They have to learn independence sometime, don't they? And don't you deserve, after so long, a four-star restaurant?

The Federal has so much going for it, it's almost uncanny. It's as if someone were hauling a polished cosmopolitan restaurant from London to New York, got tired, and decided to set it down in Agawam instead. Who can complain? It's ours now, and just a half-hour from Hartford, meaning all residents from the capital and points north owe it to their palates to visit this restaurant.

It's dishes like the red beet risotto that won the praise from my table. Not that it's risotto, really ... it's pieces of beet cut into tiny chunks, then simmered in its own juice as if it were Arborio. The result is a flavor so intense it makes regular boiled beets taste like potatoes. This ruddy little riot was dressed up with a bit of salty bacon, sweet, crunchy walnuts, creamy Roquefort crusted goat cheese, and the mild tartness of orange. Order this dish. There's a very good chance you've never eaten anything like it.

How interesting that a restaurant so fresh dates back to the 1930s, when the Federal Hill Club first fired up the ovens. Not that the '30s were lacking in innovation – after all, it was the era that brought us Ritz crackers and Rice Krispie treats – but one has to admit we've come a long way when fragrant truffled risotto balls arrive at the table atop spotless steel spoons, an amusee so rich and naughty your tongue will deserve a spanking.

I admit: Maybe the décor won't knock you dead. I'd hoped the dramatically antiquated columns outside would give way to an ultra-modern interior. Not the case. The bar is sort of funky, but the dining room itself could be any upscale restaurant. It's clean. It's white. It's sociable without being intrusive, and there's some smooth music in the background. But, while the feel of it might suggest “occasion,” this is truly an all-occasion restaurant, where even a brief visit for dessert would be worth the trip.

Their crème brûlée, for example, was an experience in itself. At its core, it was vanilla bean crème brûlée ... you've probably read about it in this column before, as every local restaurant insists upon serving it. At The Federal, however, they make some big changes. It's actually baked within the hollowed-out shell of a small pumpkin, which gives it a presentation so playful that they could only get away with it for dessert. Not only was it charming, the pumpkin added an aromatic autumn flavor to the cream. Best of all, the top was caramelized in such a way that the



crisp was three times as thick as most crème brûlées, while still maintaining perfect texture. It was like a brûlée cookie, and the whole treat could be lifted from the pumpkin and crunched up in one delicious bite.

I joked to the server that I wanted to wrap up the pumpkin shell as a souvenir. She nodded her head as if that were a perfectly reasonable suggestion and reached for the plate. This staff is unfailingly, unbelievably obliging and polite. We're not talking Stepford servers, but close. I loved it. None of that chit-chatty, hey-there-buddy, lemme-take-a-seat-at-your-table-and-tell-you-'bout-the-specials kind of waiters here (which, by the way, I detest). This is a classy joint, and your waiter here will treat you like a classy customer.

This fine service includes polite and thorough explanations of the many unusual ingredients on the menu (like Sottocenere, a creamy Venetian cheese with flakes of black truffle, or cèpes, a meaty wild mushroom). The chef has no hang-ups about including such rarities on the menu, and you should have no hang-ups about trying them all. Cool, clean slices of rare tuna, served atop creamed spinach and a peppery carrot bisque. Savagely savory monkfish, a fabulous fish when you can find it, graced by garlic, poached lobster, tarragon, and a celeriac puree. Truffled lentils, foie gras butter, and shallots crisped to the texture of crackling, all served around a Cornish hen richer than Paris Hilton and twice the fun. There was even a much-welcome twist on the surf and turf, almost giving a wink to the restaurant's dinner-club legacy by replacing shrimp and prime rib with crisped Atlantic salmon and a braised osso buco, served with fregola (Italian couscous) and an orange gremolata.

Drop everything and go to this restaurant. Order cocktails. Order a bottle of wine. Order appetizers, entrées, and desserts. Just don't order the "truffles to go." They're 15 bucks, and when I got home and opened up the box, I thought the muddy little giblets were skimpy and just plain no good.

What, you didn't think The Federal would get away scot-free, did you?

The Federal

135 Cooper St. Agawam, MA
413-789-1267

Hours:

Tues-Wed 5-9 p.m.
Thurs-Sat 5-10 p.m.
Sunday, 11:30 a.m.-2 pm.
Closed Monday

Prices:

Appetizers: \$7.50-\$17.50
Entrées: \$17-\$29.50
Desserts: \$6.50-\$11.50