

THE PHANTOM DINER

John J. Jeffries keeps focus on farm-fresh food

It's hard to believe that John J. Jeffries, a gem of a restaurant in downtown Lancaster, has been around for more than a decade. Time flies, as they say.

But I can say, after an overdue return visit to this unique (in venue and in menu) eatery, that JJJ's still got it.

It's located just off the lobby of the very cool Lancaster Arts Hotel, a boutique joint filled with original work, most from local or Pennsylvania artists.

The restaurant, which sports a lovely long two-sided bar, a dining room and patio dining, was a central Pennsylvania pioneer in farm-to-table cuisine. And, seriously, is there a better place in the state than Lancaster County to stake that claim? I don't think so.

Now this is a menu in constant flux since the whole premise of the restaurant is farm freshness and so they're cooking and serving what's happening at the moment.

This is a good thing. But to give you an idea of what's in store, appetizers might include a strawberry salad with feta cheese and roasted almonds, shrimp and grits, a soup of the day, soft tacos with beef, onions, salsa and guacamole or a mini-version of surf 'n turf with a scallop and shaved raw beef. Prices range from \$9 to \$13.

On my visit, the soup drew attention because it was two soups in one. Literally served in the same bowl, side by side, separated solely by different consistencies, and winning, by the way, rave reviews, the "soups" of the day were a corn bisque and a tomato garlic scape bisque.

Clever offering. Well received.

I, on the other hand, opted for a classic, a favorite and a rarity on most central Pennsylvania menus: fried green tomatoes. They were perfect. Thin, cornmeal encrusted and flavorful.

Entrees usually include a mix of beef, fowl, seafood and vegetarian, and range in price from the low to high \$20s. Let me just say this is a bargain because this kitchen has top-notch talent and delivers nothing but top-notch quality food. Entrees might include "The Mighty Meatloaf," grass-fed beef with some potatoes and a reduction sauce; a veggie dish of bean cake with portobello and marinara sauce; a seafood catch of the day; some kind of chicken or pheasant dish; and a couple of standards that really are must-tries.

I had one: Fritz Family Farm Acorn Fed Heritage Pork Gordita, a wonderful and wonderfully seasoned dish served as a chop with Johnnycake and grits. Worth the visit.

There's an impressive wine list, seasonal beers, some fun cocktails and very good French press coffee.

Oh, and the name? When the now-hotel/restaurant site was being renovated (it had been a tobacco warehouse), an inspection stamp was found bearing the name of tobacco inspector John J. Jeffries.

Go and try the food served under his moniker.

and less
id her-
it how
n, we

school

It's located just off the lobby of the very cool Lancaster Arts Hotel, a boutique joint filled with original work, most from local or Pennsylvania artists.

The restaurant, which sports a lovely long two-sided bar, a dining room and patio dining, was a central Pennsylvania pioneer in farm-to-table cuisine. And, seriously, is there a better place in the state than Lancaster County to stake that claim? I don't think so.

Now this is a menu in constant flux since the whole premise of the restaurant is farm freshness and so they're cooking and serving what's happening at the moment.

This is a good thing. But to give you an idea of what's in store, appetizers might include a strawberry salad with feta cheese and roasted almonds, shrimp and grits, a soup of the day, soft tacos with beef, onions, salsa and guacamole or a mini-version of surf 'n turf with a scallop and shaved raw beef. Prices range from \$9 to \$13.

On my visit, the soup drew attention because it was two soups in one. Literally served in the same bowl, side by side, separated solely by different consistencies, and winning, by the way, rave reviews, the "soups" of the day were a corn bisque and a tomato garlic scape bisque.

Clever offering. Well received.

I, on the other hand, opted for a classic, a favorite and a rarity on most central Pennsylvania menus: fried green tomatoes. They were perfect. Thin, cornmeal encrusted and flavorful.

Entrees usually include a mix of beef, fowl, seafood and vegetarian, and range in price from the low to high \$20s. Let me just say this is a bargain because this kitchen has top-notch talent and delivers nothing but top-notch quality food. Entrees might include "The Mighty Meatloaf," grass-fed beef with some potatoes and a reduction sauce; a veggie dish of bean cake with portobello and marinara sauce; a seafood catch of the day; some kind of chicken or pheasant dish; and a couple of standards that really are must-tries.

I had one: Fritz Family Farm Acorn Fed Heritage Pork Gordita, a wonderful and wonderfully seasoned dish served as a chop with Johnnycake and grits. Worth the visit.

There's an impressive wine list, seasonal beers, some fun cocktails and very good French press coffee.

Oh, and the name? When the now-hotel/restaurant site was being renovated (it had been a tobacco warehouse), an inspection stamp was found bearing the name of tobacco inspector John J. Jeffries.

Go and try the food served under his moniker.

If you go

What: John J. Jeffries

Where: Lancaster Arts Hotel, 300 Harrisburg Ave., Lancaster

Hours: Open for dinner seven days a-week starting at 5:30 p.m.; bar opens at 4 p.m.

Notes: On-site parking; takes major cards; reservations recommended

Information: 717-431-3307 or johnjjeffries.com

and less
and her-
it how
on, we

school
injury

writing
ent to
ound
at the
deal-

story
versa-
at lis-
rdose
d one