

CLEAN PLATE CLUB

Clean Plate Club (September 30, 2009)

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Big Rock Chop House

Steaks, Seafood and Beer ...Oh My!

Big Rock in Birmingham is not just a restaurant, it is a culinary compound. Taking up almost the entire block, this mecca of exceptional cuisine houses a banquet hall that can seat 300 people, multiple dining rooms, a cocktail lounge featuring live entertainment and best of all, a brewery. This week, CPC was lucky enough to get the grand tour and then take a seat in the center of it all: Big Rock's main dining room.

Chef Brian Henson is taking classic chop house standards and infusing them with modern elements, unique ingredients and hip presentations to form a truly innovative and appetizing menu.

"[Henson] does a lot of seasonal dishes," explains General Manager Vera Day Rizer. "He changes the menu about six times a year as ingredients become available." The kombucha squash soup made with lingonberries and foie gras is a decadent example of Henson taking the essence of autumn and melding it into a refined representation of Thanksgiving flavors.

Henson also prepares a rib-eye steak, bone in, with a grid of flawless grill marks. The meat is soaked for a minute in soy sauce before cooking, which infuses an unmatched flavor in addition to caramelizing the steak. Smooth and creamy white cheddar and roasted garlic mashed potatoes, and cultivated, Michigan-grown trumpet mushrooms cooked with shallots in red wine and red wine vinegar, form the bed where this mighty steak rests. The acidity of the shallots balances the rich meat and potatoes, although this type of richness is always welcome.

Seafood dishes here are interesting. Henson offers a perfectly moist and firm piece of white fish, steamed on cherry wood planks that have been soaked in Big Rock's own red ale. The fish is served with a roasted tomato pesto salsa that is garlicky and rich and embodies all the go-to flavors of Italy. Dover Sole fillets and roe are also offered, lightly dredged in seasoned flour and then sautéed. The fish is served on a bed of red lentils and watercress and garnished with hazelnuts and purple amaranth (an edible flower.)

Partaking in dessert and the amazing beers is a must at Big Rock. "I like putting different mouth appeals together, and I love putting spice in desserts," says Henson. Not a fan of rice pudding himself, Henson took a classic and made it to his liking, using sushi rice to create a more substantial texture, topping it with a chocolate and chili pepper mousse and surrounding it with port wine-soaked dried fruits. In addition to savory beer pairings, desserts are also matched with brewmaster Dan Roger's hand-crafted beers. The rice pudding is spot-on with the Imperial Stout. Taking a twist on strawberry shortcake, Big Rock's features basil, strawberry Bavarian cream and a black and white sesame cracker, among other surprises, and should be savored with the Strawberry Blonde. | **RDW**

