

EATING OUT

OUR RATING SYSTEM ★★★★★ Excellent ★★★★★ Very good ★★ Good ★ Fair



NOAH K. MURRAY/THE STAR-LEDGER

Scallops with butternut squash purée, bacon, crawfish risotto and peas at the Rail House 1449 in Rahway.

Back on track, in Rahway

The Rail House 1449

1449 Irving St., Rahway. (732) 388-1699, therailhouse.com

Hours: 5 to 9 p.m. Mondays to Thursdays, 5 to 10 p.m. Fridays to Saturdays. Closed Sundays.

★★★★★

By Cody Kendall

FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

Restaurant David Drake was a culinary beacon of hope in Rahway when it opened in the summer of 2005, as the city worked at reinventing itself.

Having a New Jersey celebrity chef cooking in the developing arts district put a special sheen on efforts to raise Rahway's profile. But the economic downturn contributed to the restaurant's closing four-and-a-half years later, and the future of the refurbished 1830s building

became a question mark.

Its welcome opening as the Rail House 1449 in December, however, made it seem like Restaurant David Drake had been reborn, minus the eponymous chef. The comfortably elegant interior remains the same and it's still a high-end stop.

The food is less far-ranging than that of its predecessor, featuring such culinary pillars as shrimp cocktail (\$12), albeit with a wasabi cocktail sauce, and steaks: a 16-ounce New York strip (\$39) and filet mignon (\$38 for 10 ounces, \$28 for six).

The dishes are rewarding, however, and there is enough judicious creativity to stimulate interest. Restraint and craftsmanship are the hallmarks here.

Crème fraîche and truffle

oil provide the sparkle atop a wild mushroom soup (\$6) that is an intense winter delight. Handmade ricotta gnocchi (\$17/\$11), good enough to stand alone, is even more pleasing, with earth tones of squash, spinach and wild mushrooms, plus basil and parmigiano for accents. Roasted Muscovy duck breast (\$29) is balanced between wild mushrooms and a dried cherry gastrique, with an undercurrent of cilantro that adds just a touch of surprise. It comes with a choice from the list of seasonal side dishes that include asparagus, sautéed spinach and broccoli rabe.

On the seafood front, there are several exciting selections such as potato-crusted Scottish salmon in a lobster cream sauce (\$26).

Vegetarians have a couple of possibilities tailored for them, including stewed tofu and lentils with mixed veggies and rice (\$17).

There is a by-the-glass assortment of wines that has acceptable choices for \$7 and \$8, though it's all too easy to spend more. You'll find some bottles for less than \$30, but if you like a wide range from which to pick, plan on going higher.

Pleasing desserts include a chocolate ganache tart (\$9) highlighted by pistachio crumbles on the side, raspberries and fresh whipped cream. This is so rich that it pleads to be savored, rather than devoured. Eat it with respect. A warm apple custard tart (\$8) is topped with vanilla gelato, decorated with lines of dark chocolate. Bananas

Foster (\$8) and cheesecake (\$8) also are possibilities to wrap up the meal.

Service is relaxed but proper. Everything gets accomplished in a friendly way that welcomes questions and puts guests at ease. However, prices were not read when specials were recited. Although we kept asking for the price of nearly every item, the server never offered it unless we requested it.

Make it simple: just print out the specials and then there isn't an issue.

Despite the formality of the food, no one stands on ceremony, and we saw several patrons in casual wear, though those who want to dress up certainly won't feel out of place.

Folks looking for a bargain can try the three-course

price-fixed meal for \$35 on Tuesday nights. There are also multi-course special meals at different prices that come with wine during the week.

The physically challenged should call ahead during the winter so the gate to the back garden (used for warm-weather dining) can be opened to permit access without having to deal with the stairs at the main entrance.

Rail House could not have a better location. It's across from the railroad station, a few steps from the Union County Performing Arts Center and around the corner from a municipal parking garage. The lovely building deserves a second chance to make its mark as a fine dining opportunity.

Cody Kendall:
CodyDine@aim.com