



Dan'l Webster Inn offers exquisite meals in charming setting

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STAFF WRITER

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We try to end our hectic summers with a nice family dinner before the kids head back to school. Since we had lobsters at a picnic table last August, I looked for a place this year that was fancy enough to require forks but not sports jackets.

I'd had a comfortable and delicious Thanksgiving-style meal at The Dan'l Webster Inn several years ago and decided it might be time to stop in again. Although a dark and stormy night (truly) obscured the view, the glass-walled conservatory, with its high-backed striped chairs and crystal chandelier, still projected the feeling of a special night out as I remembered it.

What had changed dramatically, for the better I'd say, was the menu.

While you can still get New England standards, such as prime rib or shrimp cocktail, the inn also offers a score of entrees that look like they were clipped from the pages of Gourmet magazine and taste like the food of dreams. I like to explore the balance of flavors in a dish so, for me, it's great that Dan'l Webster offers demi — or half meals at half price — so you can experiment.

Its take on surf-and-turf had a horrible name, Beef Crabioli (what is that, pasta that's mad at the world?) but a perfect execution: Finely minced Kobe beef and black truffles came in tender ravioli topped with Alaskan king crab that melted in your mouth as easily as the butter in which it was poached. The appetizer (\$11.50) was finished with a cabernet demi glaze and a bernaise sauce: The slightly tart wine glaze and lemony sauce fairly danced across your tongue.

It sounds like hyperbole but, in truth, it's the work of the inn's saucier. Not only did these sauces have complex notes, the kaffir lime and green curry sauce that accompanied my demi portion of pan-roasted butterfish with coconut fried rice (\$15) surprised us all by starting out mildly sweet and finishing a few seconds later with a spicy pop on the back of the palate. (I say surprised us all because we kept saying "You have to try this" as forks and spoons laden with "just a taste" made their way around the table so often other guests might have pegged us as a band of visiting jugglers.)

My only complaint about the butterfish special was that the vegetables were sliced into such thin splinters that they lost most of their own flavor and ended up merely as texture for the sauce. Had they been cut just a little wider, there would have been a crispy spray of zucchini, summer squash or pepper from each.

My husband's sirloin steak (\$33) was free of antibiotics and steroids, but, tastewise, it was just a steak, served with a side of herbed butter. He enjoyed the polenta with mushrooms but, overall, wished he had gone with something more intriguing, such as the wok-fired salmon, finished with white soy and sweet chili beurre blanc. He did really enjoy the delicately spiced lobster chowder (\$6.50) that started his meal.

My son was amazed at the creaminess of his Lobster Risotto (\$25), which, I suppose, means I should use a richer stock and stir more patiently when I make it at home. And I was very pleased with my appetizer and demi dish, which I owe in part to our server's suggestion.

She was attentive, friendly and knowledgeable about the menu. My husband forgot his glasses, which was disappointing since the menu is well-written and each one has a unique piece of art on the front. No problem, our server said, the dining room keeps reading glasses in different strengths to be lent for just such occasions.

Getting back to the food, Dan'l Webster's sauces are stupendous, and we weren't sure anything would beat them — until dessert came. I resisted, but only with the promise of an extra spoon to try a bite of the hazelnut creme brulee and mousse towers (wafer thin chocolate cake topped with dark, white and milk chocolate mousses). The

Web site bills these as edible works of art, and indeed they are. But the protests of they're too pretty to eat quickly fell to the consensus that they tasted too good to sit and look at.

When I see a play that I really enjoy I often wish I were in it. When I enjoy a meal this much, I find myself thinking about what to order next time. I'd like to try something, perhaps the shrimp pad thai, from the green palate menu, which offers choices that are good for you, specifically in creating acid-base balance or pH. And maybe a petite sweet, one of four dainty desserts that cut cost to \$2.50 and hopefully keep calories in that neighborhood as well.

If you go: Open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily

Rating:

Cost: \$\$ — \$\$\$

Reservations: Yes

The Dan'l Webster Inn

149 Main St., Sandwich

508-888-3622 or 800-444-3566

www.danlwebsterinn.com

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Cost: \$\$\$

Reservations: Yes

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