

Portsmouth Herald Spotlight

Dining Out: Epoch Restaurant and Bar

By [Rachel Forrest](#)

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If you go by its definition as an event indicating a new beginning or memorable development then "Epoch" is the perfect name for this new restaurant and bar in the renovated Exeter Inn.

It's definitely a new beginning for the Exeter Inn, which was looking quite run-down until they jazzed up everything in the past few months and the restaurant has undergone a dramatic change as well. Gone is great-grandma's parlor décor that hadn't been refreshed in an eon — now it's like your hip uncle's pad with cool bar and lounge, elegant modern dining area in a thoughtfully designed ambience that "works."

The food is updated too. Local is king of course here as it is all over the Seacoast, and the dishes are lively, interesting and delicious. It's not upper echelon fussy but it all works together to create one of those holistic seamless experiences I seek but rarely find.

Hanging out at the bar were all the regulars I'd come to know from other restaurants in my Exeter days, which was comforting in a funny sort of way. The bar is classy and bright and there are many interesting cocktails, including the ability to order a "flight" of three different cocktails in mini form, an offering I suspect might change soon because it sure looked like it would slow things down to make many orders of them when it gets busy.

The restaurant has as many as 30 wines by the glass and a nicely priced, expansive wine list. Chef Jodi and my not-yet-column-ready mystery companion and I walked down the glowing red steps and from the bar and sat in the large dining room. In sunny weather there's an outdoor area looking over the lush grounds for weddings and such, which will be nice. There are some cool semi-circular booths as well, but no seat in the house is bad.

We started with the slow-roasted orange ginger pork, three delicious cubes of surprisingly lean pork belly with a perfect crunchy seared top (\$8). The pork was tender and infused with the flavors of citrus and ginger as well as a rhubarb gastrique. Bull's blood microgreens were a nice touch, adding a bit of tang to it all. The corn-encrusted crab cake was huge, enough for a meal (\$11). There was plenty of crab meat and the crust was nice and crisp. A salsa of ripe avocado and cilantro was a good accompaniment and the roasted garlic aioli was a good, mild sauce for it all. My gazpacho was a smooth bowl of vegetable pizzazz with a swipe of heat from chipotle crème fraiche (\$3 cup/\$6 bowl) and an endive and pear salad had two warmly oozing rounds of delicate goat cheese encrusted with macadamia nuts to put on top of spiced pears or chips made from dried sweet orange (\$9). Each element was a delight.

On the entrée menu some of the dishes have a half-order option and since I only eat half my food anyway and bring the rest home, I was happy to see it. First, no one needs to eat as much food as we get served in restaurants; second, it also brings down the price.

My pepper-crust New York strip was a half order at \$15 and it was a perfect size and perfectly cooked. It came with two bacon-corn fritters with pieces of sweet corn inside, fluffy and crispy, and some simple sautéed spinach. A coffee sauce under the steak was rich and creative. Chef Jodi tried the General Stark scallop papardelle with immense scallops, spicy chorizo, spinach and a vodka cream sauce made with the Flag Hill General Stark vodka (\$19). It as a very large portion especially with the pasta. It would be good to have a half order option on that dish as well. The Epoch duo with filet mignon and a small butter poached lobster tail was pricey at \$32, but the meat was very well-prepared. Bacon truffle mashed Yukon Gold potatoes were creamy and rich, although the very talented Executive Chef Stephen Harding or someone mashing those potatoes has a heavy hand with the truffle oil.

Drum roll please. The desserts are very good too. It's been a long time since I've been able to say that. Dessert chef Natalie Goddard offers a tasting of three desserts for \$9 and take that offer to sample a few. Her white chocolate Bavarian cream with a peach zinfandel reduction and fresh berries was smooth as silk, and the chocolate marquis, a flourless chocolate cake with a coconut coulis, was dense and decadent. A chocolate crème brûlée had vanilla custard on top and a layer of milk chocolate custard below, which disrupted the consistency of the whole, but the flavors were good.

Service here is also very good. I recognized a few members of the staff from other restaurants like The Wentworth and the old Metro and there has been a great deal of attention paid to training this staff to be welcoming, professional and knowledgeable. Chef Harding comes out to talk to guests, always a nice touch. While the atmosphere is still unstuffy and relaxed, there is just an air of impeccable polish here from the service to the décor to the creative and tasty cuisine. It's an epoch for Exeter indeed.

Rachel Forrest is a former restaurant owner who lives in Portsmouth. Her column appears Wednesdays in Go & Do. Her restaurant review column, Dining Out, appears Thursdays in Spotlight magazine. Hear her on Wine Me Dine Me on alternate Wednesdays at noon on WSCA-FM 106.1. She can be reached by e-mail at rforrest@seacoastonline.com.

DINING OUT: EPOCH RESTAURANT AND BAR

Food **** and a half. Thoughtful, creative cuisine, which, while not ultra high-end, delivers on its promise.

Service ****. Polished, helpful, friendly, enthusiastic and efficient.

Ambience **** and a half. Someone thought a great deal about the décor here and it all comes together in understated elegance with whimsical accents.

Overall **** and a half. Epoch has created a rare harmony of food, service and atmosphere.

Ratings

***** - Excellent,