

Warming the heart, filling the belly

By Leigh Clarkson, for NightLife

I don't care what your resolutions are. Cold winter weather demands comfort food. Rich, slow-cooked, belly-warming dishes. And I've found just the place to get it.

Stratford's The Parlour is in an inconspicuous spot — tucked inside the Best Western hotel in the town's core. As it is with many hotel restaurants, you likely wouldn't think to go without a recommendation. So here it is.

The building itself is noteworthy; built in 1871, the hotel was originally called The Mansion House and served the Grand Trunk Railway and its nearby repair facility. The dining room has an old-school feel to it with its brick and woodwork, stained glass windows and dim lighting.

We recently stopped in for lunch after a wintery hike at the nearby Wildwood Conservation Area. It was one of those afternoons where the snow clung perfectly to every branch and twig and the woods were dim and quiet. Such beauty demanded a follow up meal to match and The Parlour didn't disappoint.

The restaurant bills itself "fine dining and gastro pub," and that's pretty much on the money. Some of the standard pub is here — fish and chips, chicken wings, brisket and potatoes — but it's a step up from your usual Irish-pub-in-a-kit spots. There's also a fair number of international dishes on the menu, some, like ramen noodle bowls (choose from barbecue pork, poached salmon or vegetarian), less expected than others.

We started with a couple of cold pints of the excellent Stratford Pilsner. When in Rome, right? But there's a long list of beer to choose from and a fairly extensive wine list, to boot. Nice of our server to bring a tall, cold bottle of water to the table, too, without our having to ask.



For appetizers, Japanese vegetable potstickers (\$10) came with a spicy soy dipping sauce and, though demure, were both substantial and flavourful considering the dearth of meat. Caesar salad (\$8) featured a creamy, well-balanced homemade dressing and warm bacon lardons. We licked up every bite.

We went two ways with the mains. A smoked trout dish featured fish from New Dundee's Lyndon Farms, zingy carrot salad and a dollop of horseradish cream (\$13). It was light and lovely — would be perfect with a crisp white wine.

And then there was the jaw-dropping short rib poutine (\$15) — red wine braised, fork tender meat and winter veg in a rich, glossy reduction scattered haphazardly over chunky french fries with gooey cheddar and mozzarella. It had the potential to be oversalted, but it wasn't. The word "pornographic" came to mind as I dug wide-eyed into the big, greedy bowl. Ho-ly. A dish I will think back on and swoon about long into the foreseeable future.

On a return visit for dinner, I tucked into some very fresh steamed mussels (nary a fishy taste to be found) with bacon, cider and cream (\$10) and thoroughly enjoyed a piping hot, stick-to-your-ribs

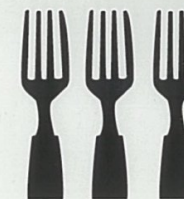
duck confit cassoulet with firm navy beans, root vegetables, crispy bread-crumbs and house-made garlic sausage (\$25). Again, perfectly seasoned and not overly salty, as is so much of what we eat these days.

Desserts are made at the restaurant, not brought in (yay!) and a sticky toffee pudding with vanilla ice cream hits the spot with its warm butteriness (\$10). Yum . . . comfort food at its best.

At the bottom of The Parlour's menu is an invitation: "If any part of your dining experience is not to your satisfaction, please give us the opportunity to address it." I appreciated that but it wasn't necessary to do so on either of my visits; service was warm, prompt and professional and food was never less than delicious.

Stratford may be known as a summer destination, but The Parlour is reason enough to head west for a winter weather warm-up. It's cosiness personified.

Assessing food, atmosphere, service and prices, Dining Out restaurant reviews are based on anonymous visits to the establishments. Restaurants do not pay for any portion of the reviewer's meal. Leigh Clarkson can be reached at leigh-clarkson@yahoo.ca



1 fork: fair
2 forks: good
3 forks: excellent
4 forks:
outstanding
RATING: 3
FORKS

THE PARLOUR

101 WELLINGTON ST.
STRATFORD
519-271-2772
WWW.THEPARLOUR.CA

Hours

Sunday to Wednesday,
6:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. (but
the bar is open until mid-
night); Thursday to Satur-
day, 6:30 a.m. to 12 a.m.

Wheelchair accessibility

Fully accessible

Cuisine

Cosy, gastro pub fare

Reservations

Yes

Atmosphere

Upscale English pub —
clean, dark, woodsy and
warm.

The menu

Appetizers run the gamut
from salads (\$8 to \$10) to
Japanese pot stickers
(\$10) and smoked trout
(\$13). Dinner mains in-
clude pub favourites like
fish and chips (\$15) and
burgers (\$15) plus the
to-die-for short rib poutine
(\$17). There are also noo-
dles (Spicy Thai, \$15 and
General Tsao, \$21), and
items dubbed "Chef's
Inspirations" including

duck confit cassoulet
(\$25), braised pork roast
with barley risotto (\$23).
The lunch menu includes
wings (\$10 per pound),
intriguing ramen noodle
bowls (also \$10), and a
handful of sandwiches in
the \$8 to \$11 range.

Desserts are made
in-house.

Wine list

About a half dozen
house reds and the
same number of whites,
including several VQAs,
go for \$6 to \$9 per glass;
bottles hover around the
\$30 mark. There are four
feature wines, slightly
pricier, available by bot-
tle, half-litre and glass.
And a longer list of 10
reds and a dozen whites
are available solely by the
bottle, starting around
\$35.

Service

Excellent

The bill

Dinner for two — with
wine, apps and mains —
was about \$80 before tip.

In a nutshell

A cosy spot with deli-
cious, belly-warming
food.