

Hop Vine Café: A satisfying kick

Food	★★★★
Ambience	★★★★
Service	★★★★
Value	★★★★

12 Crane St., Southbridge

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By Ina Irving

Worcester activists have lauded mixed-use development as a way to revitalize downtown and surrounding neighborhoods. One need only take a short ride down Route 20 to see how well it's working at 12 Crane, in the Flat Iron district of Southbridge.

The overhauled building also houses a tavern and a "pastry studio," with a tobacconist, coffee roaster, brewery and entertainment venue yet to open. The heart of any home, or mixed-use complex, is where the good food is — and the Hop Vine Café provides such a heart.

Our first impression was purely visual. First, a bantam bar is wedged into the corner. The original concrete space is accented from floor to ceiling with oriental rugs, dark, warm colors, wrought-iron chandeliers, velvet brocade chairs, and heavy wood. The River Run is a separate dining area with views of the Quinebaug, and other secluded spaces are tucked away, off the main dining room. Like the rest of the 12 Crane interiors, the restaurant was designed and decorated by artists of the Sevensgaits gallery.

Designated a "gastropub" — ubiquitous in Europe and materializing in Boston and other American cities — the Hop Vine offers an upscale "Celtic-inspired" menu, often pairing dishes with suggested wines, in a relaxed setting.

The appetizers are an interesting combination of the familiar (pub chips, onion rings), and of Celtic delicacies (miniature bridies, graavlox). My friend and I went for the Welsh rarebit (\$7), a dish on the menu of many an English novel, but something I've never actually consumed. Before our plate of soft French bread slices, dipped in rich, creamy cheese with a balsamic swirl was served, we were treated to a complementary course of the same warm French bread and a bowl of caper berries in oil and vinegar. A delicious surprise, the caper berries tasted similar to snappers, or pickled green beans. A savory snack, rarebit is sometimes cooked with a dark beer. I was unsure if there was Guinness

in this batch, but positively tasted mustard, which added a satisfying kick.

We were offered several seafood specials, and my friend snatched the grilled shrimp appetizer (\$12), along with a house salad (\$5), for her dinner. I mulled over the regular menu selections (\$17-\$28), fish & chips, meat pies, steak, lamb, Cornish game hen, and chose maple-glazed pork tips (\$19) and added a cucumber and dill salad (\$8).

Our conversation, over crisp, refreshing salads, was punctuated by waves of unseen foods meeting boiling hot oil from the kitchen, hidden only by a bough-draped three-quarter wall. Digging into our main courses, my friend kept it light with her plate of fat, firm shrimp, delectably grilled in oil and herbs. In contrast, my dish was laden with medallions of tender pork, dressed up in a complex, full-bodied sauce, alternately sweet and savory, and accompanied by smashed potatoes and hearty chunks of mixed vegetables.

Indulging to the last, we made our dessert selections, chocolate mousse (\$6) and bananas Foster (\$7). When a mouthful makes you swoon, you know you've found something good. This was my reaction to my first bite of caramelized banana, vanilla ice cream, and homemade whipped cream. Bananas even embellished my friend's sundae glass of lush chocolate. The bill for this happy find came to \$75.20, including two inexpensive (\$4 each) Captain & Cokes. o

Ina Irving is a pseudonym.