

Four Stars Over Bethlehem

BY BARBARA ROSENBERG

Cities named Bethlehem seem to have a way of producing miracles—the most recent one brought into being by the steel company of the same name, conceived as a playground for its own execs and visiting firemen. The only star in evidence this time around is emblazoned on the match covers of a remarkable restaurant in this otherwise unremarkable Pennsylvania community about sixty miles from Philadelphia via the Northeast Extension of the Pennsylvania Turnpike.

Evidently, in its desire to make the Continental Room at the Hotel Bethlehem the ne plus ultra of the region, Bethlehem Steel gave the hotel (which it owns) carte blanche to furnish and equip its restaurant with the best of everything, and mandated the management to provide food to match.

Management rose to the challenge and with infinite wisdom imported an authentic maitre d'hotel with credentials from Washington's old Salle Du Bois and New York's Four Seasons to run the operation.

And run it is, to a fare-thee-well—with all the niceties of table implements like fish forks and knives and a change of *couvert* at each meal. The color of the table linen is transformed for the evening meal; the pressed glassware of the earlier daylight hours gives way to cut crystal as night falls; the single long-stemmed roses on each table get traded for the silver-sheathed flickering tapers.

And it is at night, with the unlit crystal chandeliers gleaming in the reflected candle glow, that the magic really works and you feel as if you've been instantly whisked out of steel-town right into one of Europe's finer dining salons. However, nifty atmosphere alone doth not a restaurant make, there is the food to be considered.

The menu offers a fine selection of everything. For openers, an exquisite



sitely sauced crabmeat *en chemise*, and with the first bite it's apparent that the cuisine lives up to the ambience.

Plenty of truffles perfume that emperor of filet mignon, tournedos maitre d'hotel. Asparagus comes treated with hollandaise (the real thing—not the pre-fab type). Many of the entrees, like duckling à l'orange and entrecôtes au poivre, get tableside treatment, executed with grace and underplayed style, without any unnecessary histrionics. No pyrotechnical maniacs here, just enough judicious use of good brandy to achieve the desired result—perfection.

Desserts run the gamut from incredibly rich crêpes through coupe marrons to more simple fare; but surprisingly enough, there isn't a whiff of Camembert or Brie or any other cheese.

No need to brace for the check, for amazingly enough, the tab is moderate—and, for the quality of the food, a real bargain. If you order the most expensive items on the menu, three courses of them, you can run up a bill of \$12.50 per person just for food,

which may be high in Bethlehem, Pa., but is in line with big city prices.

Now, when you glance at the wine menu, be prepared. Here is where it's tempting to add a sizeable sum to that check. By special arrangement with the Liquor Control Board, the Continental Room offers all the greats, from Romanée-Conti to Chateau Lafite-Rothschild, with Taittinger Blanc de Blancs thrown in for good measure. Some lesser types and vintages are there, too, at considerably lower tariffs than those "greats" command.

The service has been burnished to a fine sheen. What polished performers the maitre d' didn't search out and bring in, he personally trained so that they operate in silky fashion. The waiters are unobtrusive and unrushed, but they're always there when they're needed to fill a glass or remove a plate . . . or to present l'addition.

Open seven days a week, but closed during the month of July. Breakfast, lunch (12-3) and dinner (6-11). For reservations 1-215-867-3711.

It's well worth the pilgrimage, especially on a warm, light June evening.

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When is a steak house not a steak house? When it's a French restaurant, obviously. And that may mean it's sort of schizophrenic in its approach to life . . . which, in the case of a restaurant, means customers.

My Uncle's Place at 281 Montgomery Avenue in Bala Cynwyd is only "French" five nights a week, and on Saturday it stops playing games and reverts to its natural self, which, as is so often the case, really has more merit than the acquired guise.

The idea of featuring a special menu on weekdays (Monday through Friday) is really a splendid one—a gimmick to lure the determined eaters of the Main Line region to do

their "dining" other nights than on the sacrosanct—and crowded—Saturday. But, unfortunately, it's not always that easy to switch gears. On "French" nights the maitre d' calls you "monsieur" or "madame" (as the case may be) and the waitress calls you "hon" or "dear" (depending on her mood).

The meat—and, incidentally, the fish—is marvelous, obviously chosen by someone who knows and appreciates quality. The steaks in particular are beautifully aged, and when the generous portions are served *au naturel*, they stand on their own merit. When they become "Frenchified" the sauces unfortunately do not live up to the character of the beef, but the price escalates somewhat. Steak au poivre bears up pretty well under its treatment, but the chateaubriand is done a disservice by the accompanying stiff Bearnaise.

Salads are rather run-of-the-mill, crisper than many, but hardly inspired, unless you call a heavy dose of garlic in the "house" dressing inspiration. Vegetables are vile—steam-table consistency, served family style, and since it's hard to imagine anyone eating more than a mouthful or so, one hesitates to think about what they do with the leftovers.

Desserts, unfortunately, don't make it either. Like the appetizers, they sound better on the menu than they taste. The mousse was blah and heavy and the Napoleons storebought.

Demitasse is unheard of, unless you count an oversized cup poured half-full out of a plastic carafe.

If you're contemplating wine, good luck. The wine situation is a disaster area. Evidently they recognize that some people enjoy wine with their meal, since French entrées are matched to suggestions of the chef as to which ones are appropriate. No prices on these—presumably you're supposed to ask for a "quote." If you insist, you'll get a wine menu, but the selection is sparse, without a single outstanding label.

Be prepared to drop \$30 to \$35 or so a couple for food and beverages on "French" nights if you order from the "Gourmet Corner" of the menu, less otherwise. But whichever night you go, you'll doubtless note the purple phaeton model over the door as you enter. It's faintly, reminiscent of the good old gangster days of the '30s, and you'll probably wonder just what it was that Uncle did that he deserved to be fingered for this place.

Dinner is served weekdays to 10:30. Saturdays until 11:30; there is a sup-

per menu till 1:00 a.m. Lunch is served on weekdays. Telephone MO 4-6571. ■ ■

CITY DINING

Because of limited space, we are obligated to confine our dining listing to those restaurants that have indicated a desire to reach the Philadelphia Magazine audience by becoming advertisers. Prices and hours subject to change.

PHILADELPHIA

(Center City)

Arthur's Steak House, 1512 Walnut St. (PE-5-2590). This meaty catery is one of the best restaurants in town and a tastefully decorated haven for beef gourmets. It also has one of the most enticing bars around; the martinis are Philly's wickedest. Some seafood and fowl specialties. L—11-3 (\$1.25-\$3.50); D—3-11, Sat 4-1 (\$3.50-\$7). Closed Sun.

Bellevue Court Lounge, rear entrance at 1418 Walnut St. Building (KI 6-1488). Tucked away on Bellevue Court at Chancellor is one of center city's liveliest bar-restaurants. Ultraviolet lighting enhances the curved beauties of the oval bar; a mural of ancient Rome sets off the fine Italian-American cuisine. L—11-3:30; D—5-10; S—10-2. Cocktail hour 4 to 6. Closed Sun.

Bookbinders, Old Original, 125 Walnut St. (WA 5-7027). This is the town's most famous restaurant, it has an international reputation, and with good reason. The specialty is seafood, including lobsters you can pick out of a tank. They've been at the same address for 100 years. Banquet rooms for 25 to 200. Free parking. Weekdays 11:30-10; opens Sat at noon. Sun at 1.

Bookbinders Seafood House, 215 S. 15th St. (KI 5-1137). Crustaceans and finny creatures predominate, but steaks and chops are succulently evident. Sam Bookbinder, scion of the famed Philadelphia restaurateurs, is the host. Private banquet room and bar and parking facilities make things easier for tired businessmen. Open daily until midnight. L—11:30-4; D—4-10; Sat 11:30-1 a.m.; Sun noon-10.

Frankie Bradley's, Juniper & Chancellor Sts. (KI 5-4350). Like the Phoenix, Frankie Bradley's has risen from the ashes of the fire that destroyed it several years ago and is re-established as a first-class early- or late-night spot to sink your teeth into a pot roast, lobster or roast duck. Spiffy decor includes paneling from the drawing room of the old Strawbridge estate. L—11:30-4:30 (\$2.65-\$6.25); D—4:30-10:30 (\$3.85-\$6.95); S—10:30-2 a.m.

Cavanaugh's, 23rd & Sansom (LO 7-9335). This is a stronghold of Irish dining and drinking, but a neighborhood pub it is not. Three separate dining rooms serve up lamb chops, steaks and pork chops in fine style, and the Guinness stout is hoisted on all sides, in the wake of tradition—the building was an Irish taproom for over 100 years. L—11-3 (\$1-\$1.75); D—3-9 (\$3-\$6); S—9-2 a.m. Closed Sun.

Frank Clements, 224 S. 15th St. (KI 5-9076). Whether you're gray-flanneled, tweeded, or