

2007: Beverly Hills Grill

Stylish neighborhood spot thrives even in tough economic times by delivering an elusive combination: Consistently outstanding cuisine, service and value

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Warm sauteed shrimp with mixed greens and chevre is one of the favorites. (Credit: Photos by Susan Tusa/Detroit Free Press)

Drop by the Beverly Hills Grill for dinner on a Monday or Tuesday, the slowest nights of the week, and the wait can be 30 minutes or more.

Come for Sunday brunch and it might be an hour.

And then there are Saturday mornings, with pony-tailed Mark Ellison mixing Bloody Marys and mimosas at the bar. All eight seats at the U-shaped counter are filled with regulars he greets by name as he sets up their usual without being asked.

He's so well-liked, people wait for a seat at the bar just so he can be their server.

The personal touch doesn't stop with him.

When the chef makes artichoke soup, a certain customer who loves it gets a call. When a regular wished the wine list had a New Zealand sauvignon blanc, the manager not only got in Cloudy Bay, he put it on the menu by the glass. When guests ask for Crab Cakes Benedict with fried eggs, well-done, the dish not only arrives as ordered, it's beautiful.

It's no secret metro Detroit's restaurants are struggling. Some well-known places closed last year and others cut prices or changed concepts in an effort to hang on until the economy improves.

But the Beverly Hills Grill isn't one of them. Keenly attuned to its clientele and stylish but unpretentious, the little place on Southfield Road near 13 Mile sails on, virtually unscathed.

In part it's because the Grill, as locals call it, is the restaurant version of the little black dress: It feels right for almost everyone and for virtually any mood or occasion.

But more important, this 19-year-old Oakland County favorite stays busy because it has built a well-deserved reputation for consistently excellent food, service, hospitality and value.

That consistency is why customers return, time after time -- and why the Beverly Hills Grill is the Detroit Free Press Restaurant of the Year 2007.

Casual but upscale, the Grill is unusual in that restaurants of its type rarely serve breakfast as well as lunch and dinner.

It's also unusual for the remarkable longevity of its staff: The chef has stayed 17 years, the evening servers average more than 10 years each, the night bus person has 16 years, and the night bartender began two weeks after the restaurant opened in 1988.

And it may be the only place in these parts with a live palm tree outside. One gets planted every summer in front of the Grill's low-slung beige building, located, of course, in the Village of Beverly Hills.

The palm is a tongue-in-cheek nod to the *other* Beverly Hills and the California fresh-food movement that was emerging when Bill Roberts bought the building, already a restaurant, two decades ago.

Inspired by a visit to trendy Mustard's Grill in Napa Valley and a side trip to Beverly Hills, he knew what he wanted the new place to be.

He'd name it the Beverly Hills Grill and keep things "just simple, and make the food and hospitality and service shine. Pretension was out; the old dark restaurants at that point were going away. If we did that, maybe we'd be successful there," he hoped.

And he thought they might eventually do breakfast, too, because the previous restaurant had.

What's striking is how true the Grill remains to its original vision of great food in a relaxed, comfortable

atmosphere.

The servers always look sharp and professional in their formal white shirts, black pants and long white aprons. But guests feel as free to come to brunch in tennis shorts as fancy hats, and at dinner, blue jeans are as common as business suits.

The range of fashions reflects another distinctive characteristic of the Grill: Its dining room is one of the most diverse in metro Detroit, a crossroads for people of all ages, styles, stations, races and walks of life.

"It's a great neighborhood restaurant, but we are also somewhat of a destination spot," says manager Carl Volk. "We really cater to the neighborhood, and it's about the passionate regular customers we have, but ... we love to have new customers coming in to be a part of the family."

Wherever they're from, they share a common objective: They've come for the always-interesting, excellent food.

Chef Patrick Roettele (pronounced ROAT-lee) offers stylishly prepared American grill and bistro fare on the regular breakfast, lunch and dinner menus.

They're studded with terrific dishes that have become Beverly Hills Grill classics, such as Bananas Foster French Toast or house-made corned beef hash at breakfast, and the chopped Doc Greene salad and the spicy Creole Gulf shrimp angel hair pasta at dinner.

But for a real taste of what Roettele and his staff can do, check the handwritten chalkboard specials that change at every meal, every day. They emphasize fresh fish, local seasonal produce, trendy ingredients and ethnic flavors that run from Asian fusion to Southern.

At dinner you'll spot dishes such as sauteed Arctic char with lemon-artichoke vinaigrette and couscous salad with tomato, fresh mozzarella and arugula. Brunch might feature lemon--mascarpone stuffed French toast with roasted pears and vanilla-pear syrup.

Prices are easily competitive for the quality of food. Average breakfast and brunch entrees are \$8 to \$10; at dinner, most entrees range from the teens to mid-\$20s.

The chalkboard -- a defining feature of the Grill -- accounts for about 60% of sales.

For regular customers, Volk says, it's "a huge draw" because it avoids the boredom that can come from eating frequently at the same place.

For the kitchen, constantly doing so many new dishes is extremely challenging, Roettele says, especially in a tiny space that turns out 220 meals on a busy Saturday night. But the creative outlet also keeps the staff excited -- and on board.

His morning and evening sous chefs have been at the Grill nine and three years, respectively -- a long time in restaurant terms, he says. He's been there since 1990.

"It's good for consistency when you don't have that turnover of people," Roettele says. "They know what we're trying to achieve."

If you'd just wandered into the Grill's airy, light-filled dining room, you'd never guess the place has been around for 19 years. There's not a stale bone in its body.

From the stylish cuisine and well-chosen wine list to the servers' crisp attire and the clean, simple sophistication of the interior, designed by architect Ron Rea, the place doesn't feel a thing like 1988.

"The guest wants to see you putting money back into the business ... to continue to feel that the place is getting better all the time," says Roberts, a former president of the Michigan Restaurant Association.

He spent close to \$175,000 three years ago to update the dining room and some exterior features. Last summer he replaced the chairs and carpet, and he just sank \$6,000 into a new fence around the trash area, because "guests see these subtle things."

That same attention to style and detail shows up in his plans for renovating the former Lepanto restaurant in Royal Oak, which he plans to reopen this summer as Town Tavern. The project is under Rea's direction.

Roberts, who also owns Streetside Seafood in Birmingham, believes in investing in people as well as property. He provides his employees with health insurance and 401(k) retirement plans -- an important part of why they stay.

The staff stability, in turn, helps create the good service and cuisine that elude so many restaurants.

"I think the restaurants that are consistent right now are probably doing all right and hanging in there. If they're erratic, that's where the problems begin," Roberts says.

When people can't go out as often or as freely, "they're going to tend to go to that restaurant that's consistent, where they know what they're getting and what the value is," he says.

And if they like a place *enough*, they'll even put up with waiting for seats.

With only 18 tables, the Grill doesn't accept reservations, so customers learn to come early -- or late. Or they stop by and get on the waiting list, find out how long it will be before a table opens, and go browse at Border's down the street or Bed Bath & Beyond next door.

Roberts says friends sometimes ask him to save them a table because their boss is coming to town and they want to eat at a certain time.

He tells them no. "If that's what you need, the Grill is the wrong place to go," he says.

While Saturday at the Grill begins with Mark Ellison pouring Bloody Marys for his regulars, the day closes with longtime night bartender and legendary sports fan David (Benson) Kent mixing martinis for his.

The constant at both ends of the day is that guests say they are regulars because the Grill gives them what they want -- whether it's excellent food and service, the right kind of atmosphere, or a sense of belonging.

Don Hattey of Birmingham, the vice president of an automotive firm, drops in at least a couple of nights a week for dinner, a drink and conversation around Benson's bar.

He comes because the Grill is "consistent" and "the food is good," he says. He finds the intimate bar "comfortable and unpretentious." And as a bonus, he can count "at least 50 significant business transactions" that have occurred because of social contacts he's made there.

Charles Fremuth of Bloomfield Township, part of Ellison's Saturday morning crowd, says he has seen the Grill continue to improve over the years: The kitchen has become more imaginative, and the service, "increasingly homey. ... You feel like you belong here. You feel like, 'It's nice to be back,' every time."

Ellison knows how important that is.

"There's a lot of comfortableness and familiarity" at the Grill, he says. "And after September 11, people are trying to find the zone. Luckily, a lot of our guests find the zone here."

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