

Naturally Grown and Served

Canebrake Kitchen strives to keep balanced and local food in its dining room

BY KATHARINE KELLY

Destination dining at Canebrake Kitchen in Wagoner might be one of the best kept secrets in Oklahoma fine dining. Sam Bracken and his wife Lisa have spent the past few years establishing a fantastic get-away resort for not only dining but also for those looking for a conference room center, a ropes course, a yoga barn and boutique.

In the process, the Brackens worked diligently and, whenever possible, used sustainable building methods in their construction, such as recycled insulation, organic paint, solar hot water, tiled floors and low-wattage halogen and compact fluorescent lighting.

Moreover, in The Canebrake Kitchen, Bracken strives to use organic, all natural, locally made or house-made foods, steaks, chicken and seafood.

"We get as much of our food stuff out of Oklahoma and as close to us as we possibly can," Bracken said. "We base it on the seasons, especially with our proteins."

He gave an example that he now has chayote squash, which he described as being like a green pear that keeps well with a good shelf life and can be fried, baked, boiled or sautéed.

He has a few hot house tomatoes, too, he said, but only uses them for sandwiches. When tomatoes were in season, he bought tomatoes from a grower in Hulbert, and, besides using them in dishes, he also prepared a tomato base, froze it and pulls it out in the winter months when he needs it. He strives to "handpick the cream of the crop," for as he said, "the quality is better."

During the winter, he and his chefs use a lot of root vegetables and winter greens, and when a friend and I dined here, we experienced the chayote squash, which was a refreshing change from the overused and trite 'vegetable medley.'

Bracken said that some items on the menu will change from week to week depending on what food he can get each week, and, of course, from season to season, as he tries to find the best vegetables and protein.

Entering onto The Canebrake grounds around 5:30pm, the rustic country scene is a welcome sight. It was dusk, and approaching the Kitchen on the winding and hilly road, we encountered a number of deer slowly crossing the road, peering at us without running too far away. Once in, we were warmly welcomed and directed to our table close to a large vibrant fireplace.

We were offered filtered water or S.Pellegrino; we opted for a bottle of the bubbly S.Pellegrino.

The Kitchen has a very fine wine list of reds, whites, ports and sherrys, dessert wines and a section labeled "interesting selections," as well as a full bar of beer, bourbon, scotch, brandy, cognac and liqueur.



MICHAEL COOPER

The Canebrake Kitchen

33241 E. 732nd Road, Wagoner | 485-1807

Hours: Wed.-Sat. 5:30-9pm, Sun. 10am-2pm

ATMOSPHERE ★★★★★ FOOD ★★★★★ SERVICE ★★★★★

(Based on a Scale of 5 Stars)

We desired to try selections from the Wine Flights list; for my friend the Rotta (\$20, Chardonnay, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon) and for me, the Red Wine (\$18, Red Truck Pinot Noir, Crios Malbec, Madfish Shiraz, Peachy Canyon Zinfandel). These various wine samplings were served throughout our dining experience, one by one. Each serving equaled about three sips, so the amount was very modest.

As an appetizer, we selected Pan-seared Seafood Cakes, which are fresh smoked Mahi Mahi and Salmon with bread crumbs and seasonings, served with poppy seed slaw and house remoulade (\$12). Two cakes were gently seared to a light crispness outside, while a tender, rich seafood body engrossed the inside with its mild smoky flavor. This was accompanied by very thinly sliced red onion, capers and sweet pickles.

Next, my dining companion ordered the Romaine and Arugula with Ranch salad (\$4.50) before his entrée. This salad was built from romaine hearts and baby arugula with Appplewood smoked bacon, toasted pepitas and red bell peppers

then tossed with The Kitchen's house Neosho River Ranch dressing. My friend found the dish delightfully fresh with the arugula dominating—which he enjoyed—and the other elements complementing.

For our main courses or "Large Plate" as it is expressed on the menu, I selected the Buffalo Meatloaf (\$17), and my friend chose the Creekstone Natural Rib Eye (\$32).

Bracken said he goes to great lengths to select his protein—chicken, beef, fish and duck—by going to Creekstone Ranch for its "no-junk," or no hormones, facility. Bracken seeks out the best place for bison, the best chicken processing plant and the best seafood that comes from its natural habitat.

The Oklahoma bison meatloaf came with prosciutto, onions and spices and served with red eye gravy, roasted vegetables and turnip-potato mash. All was simply exquisite!

Bracken said since the bison is very lean with very little fat, to "give it a little juice, we grind prosciutto and so it gives the bison a little bit of fat flavor to its profile so that its moist." He adds that

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the savory flavor comes from bell pepper, cumin, thyme and rosemary. It is cooked to medium rare, he said, which keeps it moist also.

This eight-ounce serving came in two triangular "chunks" bearing a tasty grilled crispiness on the bottom. The mash was topped with sautéed red bell pepper, red onion, broccoli, carrots with slices of chayote squash. The squash was thinly sliced and crisp, tasting like a crisp pear or green apple. This squash was an enjoyable change from standard fare.

My friend's Rib Eye was grilled medium rare and served with the Kitchen's own chipotle-esspresso sauce and pommes frites. The steak, my friend said, was simply marvelous.

Bracken said this 12-oz. steak, like all their beef, is dry-aged for two weeks before they receive it, and then "we dry age it a few days as well." He said the chefs prepare it simply by grilling it to order and adding only fresh cracked black pepper and sea salt. Taste, texture and preparation all came together with the rib eye.

The sauce, Bracken said, is made from chipotle chiles and tomato, espresso coffee beans, hot chiles and cumin. This simmers for a while, is pureed and then strained. The result is a silky smooth sauce of rich complex flavors. He particularly enjoyed the pommes frites, which were match-stick thin and very crisp.

The atmosphere is remarkable, with the feel of a mountain lodge or country without being overdone. An open kitchen offers a view into meal preparation, and as Bracken said, can provide a little entertainment for guests. New age-type music enveloped the dining areas amid the low voices of diners in conversation.



MICHAEL COOPER

Stay Local. During the rough winter months, Canebrake kitchen serves up lots of root vegetables, winter greens and Chayote Squash in its dishes.

Service was exceptional. While at times the server was not able to answer all the questions I asked about the served food, she did find the answers for me. In addition, while my friend and I were very happy to enjoy time between courses, she seemed very eager to take our order, inquiring quite often during times where we simply enjoying the slow pace of this Friday evening.

A Sunday brunch from 10am-2pm is a "large production," Bracken said. The buffet line wraps around the length of the dining room with salads, pastas, Belgian waffles, desserts (from pastry chef Sarah Levelle), carved meats, all natural sausage link, apple smoked bacon and more.

Sam Bracken and his wife Lisa live only 300 yards away from The Kitchen; it is their home and livelihood. Sam learned the business from "the school of hard knocks" as he puts it, being in the business for more than 21 years. He says he is the CEO, the executive chef, the chief visionary and chief plumber at Canebrake.

It's a definite must on the fine dining list, and reservations are highly recommended. **UTW**

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