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Takes the Steak

Red the Steakhouse

Greg McLaren

editorial@clevelandmagazine.com

We live in Cleveland, a meat-and-potatoes sort of town. As a dining public, we sometimes aspire to greater gastronomic heights, and we're getting there, albeit in fits and starts. Deep inside our culinary consciousness, though, there is something that says to many of us that a good steak is somehow the pinnacle of dining, the hallmark of "the big night out." It stands to reason, then, a good steak is easy to come by here. Harder to find, however, is a truly great steak.

If you have found yourself on such a gastronomic quest, take heart, brave pilgrim, as we're here today to lead you out of the dining desert and into the Promised Land, to a steakhouse known as Red the Steakhouse. (Did we mention that it's a steakhouse?)

Jonathan Bennett, executive chef of all things Moxie, says of the cuisine at Red: "We are just good, honest cooks, making good, honest food." While this is undoubtedly true, the result of his good, honest approach may well send shockwaves through the area's chain-owned steak concepts and beyond.

Drawing on the same uncompromising commitment to quality ingredients, well-honed culinary technique and top-notch service that have long kept Beachwood's Moxie at the top of Northeast Ohio's dining scene, Bennett and Moxie founder Brad Friedlander have opened what is arguably the best steak restaurant in Cleveland. (Feel free to argue, but I'm not listening ... la-la-la-la-la-la-la-la ... I'm not listening. Finally, my year on the debate team is paying off.)

Friedlander and Bennett initially conceived of a steak concept as a way to regain business they felt Moxie was losing to the plethora of nearby steakhouses. The Atkins diet craze was at its peak and people across the area were becoming reacquainted with their inner-cave-dwelling-animal-clubbing-pelt-wearing carnivore. Also, even a restaurant as consistently inventive and exceptional as Moxie experiences a slight decline in business after so many years and a little change is always good.

Rather than fixing what wasn't broken, however, Friedlander and Bennett set upon a crafty plan. They decided to open the new restaurant next door to Moxie. A shared kitchen and the transfer of trained, loyal Moxie employees to the new concept would ensure a smooth opening and easy operations.

Red opened Dec. 24, 2004, and, by all counts, their plan seems to have been a good one. Things run exceptionally well at Red and the restaurants have helped bolster each other's business.

"All of the cooks at Red are Moxie veterans," says Bennett. "We hired one outside guy for Red and six new staff for Moxie. With such great infrastructure, it was easier to train new people for Moxie, knowing that Red would be in good hands."

Michael Yih, the general manager, followed a similar course of action when staffing the front of the house. And if our visits are any indication, Red is in good hands indeed. On each occasion the food and service were -- simply and rarely put -- flawless.

The space itself, designed so thematically that it was actually the architect who coined the name for the eatery, is a fabulous fusion of warm, dark and clubby (what we'll call neoclassical steakhouse style) and a more streamlined Los Angeles feng shui sensibility. This feeling is, in particular, evoked by the accent columns of white stone that lighten the hot red walls and the cool plate-glass wine room at the rear of the main dining area. The real appeal of Red, however, comes from what happens within this stylish space. On each visit our service was impeccable and easily some of the most consistent that we've encountered in awhile.

Incidentally, have you ever noticed that servers never get notoriety beyond the above sort of generic statement? Well, I'm changing that right now: Thank you, Kevin B. and Sean M. You are true professionals and a credit to your field. Without you and your work and guidance, we would have to get our own food, find the bathrooms by ourselves, wonder what the hell the chef was smoking when he paired this and that, complain directly to that same irate chef when something was amiss, and only drink Chardonnay and Pinot Noir.

Speaking of wine, the list at Red is understandably deep in red wines, but still manages to feature plenty of excellent white selections. There are some great and unexpected glass pours and a nice selection of dessert wines, as well. You should, however, expect to pay premium restaurant prices for everything, as this is not a list with a lot of bargains. Also, don't be afraid to mix up reds with fish and whites with meat. You have our permission to do whatever it takes (within the boundaries of common decency and the Ohio Revised Code) to make your dinner pleasing to you and you alone (and your date). So there, viva la revolution!

So, now that you've tried the wine, let's eat. From top to bottom, Bennett's menu represents the good, honest food of which he is justifiably proud. In creating the Red menu, they've very much gone with a slightly modified, traditional steakhouse motif. Solid classics blend American and Mediterranean flavors to create offerings along the lines of what one expects to find in Chicago, Washington or New York. In our two visits, we sampled a wide selection of menu items and found everything wonderful. Here are some of our favorites.

The appetizers, as with everything at Red, are uniformly marvelous. JB's steak tartare (\$9.50) is a perfect rendering of the classic raw beef dish (sans raw egg). Bennett notably and importantly hand-cuts the steak, unlike some places that butcher the meat in a food processor, basically destroying the dish. (If you're reading this and you make tartare in this fashion, consider this an intervention. Change your method. Thank you.)

Other great dishes were the garlic shrimp (\$12.50), a zesty, perfectly prepared bowl of the ubiquitous pink crustaceans topped with toasted bread crumbs; the French onion soup gratinee (\$6.50), which was perfectly and classically executed; and Brad's hot stuffed peppers (\$8.90), which were great, filled with flavorful Italian sausage, blanketed with an excellent Mama-made-it marinara and balls of fire hot. Two bites and one of our friends perspired for the remainder of the meal.

Need to quench that burning palate? Why not have a cool, crisp salad? All of the selections are quite good and very much fall in line with the menu's classic approach. The peppery baby arugula (\$7.90) is nicely paired with salty Prosciutto di Parma, Parmigiano Reggiano and lemon-pepper vinaigrette. Want some more classic options? Try the Caesar (\$6.90), wedge of iceberg (\$6.90) with crisp pancetta (Italian bacon, basically), crumbled blue, red onions, croutons and peppered ranch dressing, or go all Italian with the salad of heirloom tomatoes, fresh mozzarella, basil, balsamic vinegar and extra virgin olive oil (\$7.50).

For entrees, Red offers a nice selection of pastas, though four out of the five feature shellfish. Seafood offerings cover night-out standards such as lobster and king crab legs (both market price and perfectly prepared), as well as some fish dishes such as the tuna "filet mignon" (\$25) with roasted red pepper rouille. A giant brined and roasted double Bell & Evans chicken breast (\$19.50) is a moist, flavorful option for those on the outs with seafood and red meat

and is easily big enough (we figured it weighed at least a pound) to satisfy any appetite. All of which brings us to the reason we came to Red in the first place ... the steaks.

The menu features the usual assortment of cuts in either prime or certified Angus beef, all of which are finished with a garlic-herb brushing. All are also damn good and among the best steaks I've had. If you're feeling particularly indulgent, the prime 16 oz. ribeye (\$31) is the true steak connoisseur's steak: perfectly marbled and meltingly tender.

In reality, though, this description fits every steak we tried. It's a funny thing, actually, that in a review of a steakhouse, the big buildup is leading to the steaks and, now that we're here, all I have to say is, they're all great. But, they are. The big payoff will come when you try Red for yourself. Oh, and the veal chop (\$29.50) was fantastic, flavorful, tender and perfectly done.

Sides are a la carte and big enough to share with the table. Once again, everything we tried was great. Especially tasty were the creamy potatoes au gratin (\$6.90), green beans with pancetta and pine nuts (\$6.50), creamed spinach (\$6.50) and escarole, tomatoes and garlic (\$6.50), my personal favorite.

If you still have room, the often-deconstructed desserts are all made in house by the inventive and extraordinarily talented Bennett Davis. Everything we tried was fabulous, though that was the basic theme of our Red experience. If you're hungry and have the room left on your credit card for that big night out, Red is the place for that perfect steak.

Red, 3355 Richmond Road, Beachwood, (216) 831-2552. Hours: Mon-Thu 5:30 - 10:30 p.m., Fri & Sat 5:30 - 11 p.m., Sun 5 - 9 p.m.