



Firing up the flavor:

Front Room owner opens Grill Room steakhouse in Old Port

June 3, 2008

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The Grill Room & Bar is located at 84 Exchange St. in Portland. It serves lunch from 11:30 am-2:30 pm, dinner from 5:30-10 pm and a bar menu from 10-12:45 pm seven days a week. FMI call 774-2333 or visit www.thefrontroomrestaurant.com/grhome. Reservations are accepted.

Life often comes full circle. This has been the case for chef Harding Lee Smith, who owns the popular Front Room on Munjoy Hill and just opened The Grill Room in the Old Port. When he returned to Maine, after living in locations as far-flung as Hawaii and Italy, he worked with Natasha Durham to open Mim's on Commercial Street.

"Before Mim's opened, I was here for a short time," Smith says of the spot across from O'Naturals, where Durham used to run her namesake Natasha's. "This spot screams urban steakhouse."

When he heard Natasha's was closing and the space was going back on the market, he pounced. Following six months of extensive renovations — which included opening up the wall, installing a huge bar and creating an open kitchen — he unlocked the doors the The Grill Room steakhouse and welcomed a packed house two weeks ago.

Smith learned about beef while working at the Morton's Steakhouse chain in Boston and about creating robust taste combinations while working at the Roadside Cafe in California.

"I have a tendency toward bacon fat and hearty flavors," Smith says. "I say bring the flavor on. People aren't here for things they can make at home."

This understanding of culinary drama was ingrained in him early in life.

"Food was very big in my family," Smith says. "Dinner parties were always a big deal. It was the '70s, and it was ceremonial and sort of a theater thing."

He goes on to add, "My dad had a restaurant (called Barbara Dean) in Ogunquit. I was flipping pancakes at (age) 7."

Now he's moved on from the griddle to the wood grill.

"The best way to cook steak is over an open fire," Smith says, and that's exactly what The Grill Room is all about. The centerpiece of the dinner menu is a traditional a la carte offering of wood-grilled meats and fish, such as filet mignon (\$26), porterhouse (\$28), rack of lamb (\$23) and salmon (\$18); starch, such as mashed potatoes, (\$2), salt roasted potatoes (\$3) and mac and cheese (\$5); vegetables, such as garlic spinach (\$3), grilled asparagus (\$6) and spicy broccoli (\$4). Diners also can choose from composed entrees, such as grilled ribeye (\$29), duck & fettucini (\$19) or seared scallops (\$19); wood-fired pizzas (\$8-\$12); appetizers, salads and soups.

"We're using naturally-raised, no antibiotics, no hormones meats," Smith says. "And almost all are from New England."

Right now Smith's spending mornings at The Front Room and the rest of the day cooking at The Grill Room. But eventually he plans to split his time between the two places and rely on his two competent staffs, which are led by chefs de cuisine Greg Wilson, at The Front Room, and Joe Boudreau, at The Grill Room.

Looking further into the future, Smith says "I'd like to have many restaurants and find niches that need to be filled." Beyond that, Smith stays mum on his ideas. But he does admit to keeping an eye on the continuing waterfront development. He adds that he's often approached about bringing a Front Room-style restaurant to Portland's suburban neighbors. He makes no mention of Ogunquit, but should he ever be persuaded to open a spot there, his life would truly have come full circle to the land of his pancake flipping youth.



Photographs by Fred Field
Harding Lee Smith of Portland is chef/owner of The Grill Room, which recently opened on Exchange Street.



Taylor Lynn of Boston, left, and Gabe DiSaverio of Portsmouth enjoyed dinner with co-workers at The Grill Room in Portland.



A selection of entrees at The Grill Room.