

North of Boston, high-end steakhouses multiply



KAYANA SZYMCZAK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

At Strega Prime in Woburn, choices include the large seafood tower, the roasted beet salad, and, of course, the bone-in sirloin steak, served with a house-made foie gras and truffle marrow butter.

By Kathy Shiels Tully | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT NOVEMBER 17, 2013

Steak isn't the only draw at Strega Prime in Woburn. There are the popovers, for example, which need a full-time employee to oversee their baking.

There's also the voluminous wine list, the fresh seafood, and the synchronized service that starts at the front door and extends into the kitchen. It's like a gastro-spa: Good for the stomach, even better for the soul.

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But don't forget the steaks, which soar past \$40 for the larger cuts, side dishes not included.

Twenty years ago, you had to trek into Boston to rack up a stratospheric bill at a steakhouse. But now these pricey eateries are popping up in suburbs north of the city.

In just the past six months, carnivores could relish the opening of Nick Varano's Strega Prime; J. Pace & Son's Rosaria in Saugus; and Davio's Northern Italian Steakhouse in Lynnfield, the hometown of chef/owner Steve DiFillippo.



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The roasted beet salad, with beets, honey whipped ricotta, mache, and pistachio dust, is served at Strega Prime Steakhouse.

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Comparison of sirloin steak prices at six upscale restaurants north of Boston

Love a good sirloin steak? Here's what you'll pay at six high-end restaurants.

They joined three established steakhouses: Pellana's in Peabody, The Capital Grille, and L'Andana, the latter two in Burlington.

Next April, Del Frisco's Grille is scheduled to open at the site of a former Dodge dealership near the Burlington Mall, said Anthony Velletta, general manager at Del Frisco's Double Eagle Steak House in Boston. Just north of the mall, the Webber Restaurant Group plans to open The Bancroft sometime next year, said Jim Murphy, president of Burlington's Chamber of Commerce.

"Back in the day, for a nice dinner you had to go into the city," said DiFillippo. "Now you can go out in your own neck of the woods. People don't want to drive."

On an average Saturday night, he said, the 9,000-square-foot Lynnfield Davio's serves 350 to

500 guests. The average tab for two is about \$250, though he and Varano said guests can eat well at their restaurants for half that amount.

The mix of corporations and retailers was among the reasons The Capital Grille branched into Burlington in 2007, and now counts such high-tech luminaries as Oracle Corp. and Nuance Communications Inc. as its neighbors, said Adam Mackler, managing partner.

Dense traffic along Route 128 is another factor. “Over 50,000 people travel into Burlington on average per day,” said Nina Marcello, The Capital Grille’s sales and marketing manager.

“I love the visibility,” Varano said of his outpost overlooking Route 128. Varano said he was scouting locations in Waltham and Burlington, but when the Woburn site became available, “it was a great opportunity.”

According to a 2013 IBIS World market research report, the premium steakhouse industry slumped along with the overall economy from 2007 to 2011. But now, it said, consumers are “flocking to restaurants such as premium steakhouses to purchase high-end meals.”

Mackler attributes the proliferation of high-quality steakhouses to their “unique atmosphere” and food quality. Another reason hits closer to home.

“Steakhouses bring us back,” said Mackler, who recalled seeing his grandfather cook steaks at family gatherings. “You get that at-home feeling of steak and potatoes, but in a relaxed, elegant atmosphere. It seems like the ultimate indulgence.”

The beef boom, however, doesn’t guarantee success. Just look at the landmark Hilltop Steakhouse in Saugus. Once nationally recognized for its popularity, last month it shut off the lights in its 68-foot-tall cactus for good, after 52 years.



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The large seafood tower, consisting of king crab, lobster tail, shrimp, and oysters, presented on two layers of plates, served with a variety of sauces, is available at Strega Prime Steakhouse.



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A bone-in sirloin steak, served with a house-made foie gras and truffle marrow butter, is served at Strega Prime Steakhouse.

“It’s sad,” said DiFillippo. “If you don’t change your concept, if you don’t change with the times, you end up closed. The Hilltop never changed.”

Three things that don’t change, said restaurant consultant David Shinney of DCS Associates of Boston, are the top reasons guests frequent upscale steakhouses. The first is service, followed by food, then ambience.

Though it isn’t at the top of the list, the food — particularly beef — is a big factor.

“People’s palates have changed, and they don’t mind paying decent money if it’s done well,” said DiFillippo.

Davio’s ships in hormone-free Brandt Beef from California, paying \$24 for a 14-ounce sirloin and selling it for \$46.

Strega uses beef from T.F. Kinnealey & Co. of Boston, but Stephane Colinet, a Strega manager and sommelier, said the restaurant will soon begin aging beef on the premises. The Capital Grille and L’Andana’s already age their own meat.

“It’s our most expensive process,” said Mackler, who said The Capital Grille’s butcher, Jefite Miranda, cuts an average of 200 pounds of beef daily, then ages it for 14 to 21 days. On any given day, 40 racks in the 10-foot by 20-foot room are filled with beef.

If the food and the service are good, the restaurant has leeway on the ambience. Pellana’s shows that.

In 2006, chef Daniel Mammola and business partner Peter Pantazelos opened Pellana’s, the first upscale steakhouse north of the Tobin, with a counterintuitive plan: Don’t emulate the big guys.

“When you think of the typical steakhouse,” said Daniella Mammola, Pellana’s operations manager and Daniel’s wife, “you think of one that’s huge, cavernous, masculine, with a steakhouse vibe, known for high-quality food and wine list. We’re a bit more intimate.”



DINA RUDICK/ GLOBE STAFF

Jefite Miranda, cq, of Burlington, the in-house butcher at Capitol Grill in Burlington, "hand-sculpts" each cut of steak. Here, he cleans and prepares center-cut filet mignon

Pellana's has 120 seats, compared with 250 to 400 for many of its competitors, she said, though it still has "420 selections on our wine list, over 5,000 bottles in the restaurant, and a wine director on site."

Strega Prime, meanwhile, sticks to the traditional formula of white linens, dark walls, leather chairs, and chandeliers. It adds its own touch of flat-screen TVs running endless loops of Varano's favorite classic movies, such as "Breakfast at Tiffany's."

On a recent Tuesday night, the bar/lounge area was packed, the dining area more than half-filled.

In the entryway, I couldn't help but stare like a tourist at the celebrity photo collage — Mark Wahlberg, Paula Abdul, Guy Fieri, and others who were photographed at Varano's Strega in the North End.

Then I passed stacks of wine lockers, each with a shiny brass nameplate bearing a diner's name. Regular customers can reserve lockers for free, I'm told, though they're filled initially with about \$1,000 worth of wines selected from among Strega's 1,300 labels, then refilled as needed.

The lounge this night was celebrity-free, but full of a varied clientele: men and women in business suits, clearly working serious deals; small groups of friends enjoying drinks and appetizers after work; a couple on a romantic date; and an older couple enjoying a meal at the bar.

I grabbed one of the last two open seats at the bar.

The menu lists a tempting blend of classic steakhouse dishes, all a la carte, starting with an imposing seafood tower in three sizes, priced from \$26 to \$95.

A popover fresh from the oven appeared with a butter dish under a silver dome. I almost cried with joy. Popovers, popular in my family, take almost 45 minutes to make; a basket of bread would be so much easier. It's a small example of how these steakhouses aim to please and distinguish themselves from the get-go.

For starters, I ordered the lightly fried parmesan and truffled calamari, topped with gremolata, peppers, fennel, and arrabiata sauce (\$13).

At my server's recommendation, I tried one of Chef Farouk Bazoune's creations, a roasted beet salad (\$11), beet puree on top of three white clouds of honey-whipped ricotta, mâche, topped with a sprinkling of pistachio dust. Absolute heaven.

Could it get any better? Yes.

To go with my choice of a 16-ounce dry-aged bone-in sirloin (\$47) cooked perfectly to medium-rare, I ordered Bazoune's autumn-inspired creations. The squash and sweet potato brûlée (\$5 for individual portion/\$9 for sharing), with its sweet, crunchy top crust, was good enough to be dessert. The cider and pancetta Brussels sprouts (\$8) balanced the cider's sweetness with the pancetta's salty bite. Who knew these much-maligned greens could taste so good?

After one meal and superb service, I was hooked. And I'm not the only one delighted with this bounty of beef.

"The first thing [our customers] will say is, 'Strega has opened in Woburn. Did you hear? Are you worried?'" Daniella Mammio said, laughing. "If anything, it's making the North Shore a dining destination."

Whether a similar trend breaks out south of the city remains to be seen, but neither Varano nor DiFillippo ruled out the possibility.

"It's going to happen," DiFillippo said. "It's just a matter of time."

Visit www.boston.com/woburn to see a photo gallery of Strega Prime and the meat locker at The Capital Grille.

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