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BOSTON GLOBE

## Chef's star power still prevails in Hull



GLOBE SOUTH DINING OUT

**Bridgeman's** 145 Nantasket Ave., Hull 781 925-6336 Hours: Monday through Thursday, 11:30 a.m. to 9 p.m.; Friday, 11:30 a.m. to 10:30 p.m.; Saturday, noon to 10:30 p.m.; Sunday, noon to 9 p.m. Major credit cards accepted.

They had me at the olive oil.

One dip of crusty Italian bread in the fine extra-virgin liquid, and I was in. After that, each of four courses had their way with me, igniting childhood memories, a reverie on food alchemy, and a longing to be back at my family's simple Italian table again.

A second visit the following week answered questions the first had posed, while assuring me that a fine kitchen will always accommodate guests' needs.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me begin at the beginning.

It's midafternoon Sunday at Bridgeman's. Nearly seven years after this popular spot opened, the two-story restaurant with a view of Nantasket Beach is still going strong. The French-trained chef, Paul Wahlberg, easily recognizable as the brother of movie star Mark Wahlberg, is visible behind the arched bays of the restaurant's open kitchen.

My husband and I choose three courses and dessert. Unable to resist fried clams (\$14), I'm pleased the waiter could offer tartar sauce rather than Bridgeman's standard spicy pepper dip. I swoon over the first clam, close my eyes with pleasure at the second, and enjoy each subsequent one a bit less, as their temperature drops, which is how it always goes with me and fried clams.

Very lightly dressed, well-tossed, lovely mesclun salads come next.

My primo piatto, or first plate, is sautéed shrimp scampi with saffron linguini, one of three pasta dishes offered in half portions (\$12/\$19). The half portion contains three perfectly cooked large shrimp that lie curled among sweet oven-cured tomatoes, spinach, and fresh linguini. Every bite is more delicious than the previous. The flavor of each ingredient seems at once to have been magnified somehow while also blending together in the saffron, butter, and wine sauce.

For the secondo, we share the pan-seared salmon (\$20), which the kitchen split for us without our asking. Each dish is exquisitely arranged with a salmon filet tilted against a bright yellow risotto cake in a pool of equally yellow sauce. A brilliant scarlet liquid streams down the food from a pile of finely chopped baked beets on top.

I had asked that the salmon not be raw in the middle, and it isn't. The moist risotto has a slight crust on the bottom, providing a crunch that grabs the senses.

Dessert was the chocolate molten cake (\$10), which I have been unable (unfortunately) to forget since first having it a couple of years ago. It was better than ever - this darkish-chocolate cupcake-shaped confection, with a texture that morphs by stages from dry and cakey through moist and moister into a warm, chocolate pudding-like center. It comes with coffee-flavored ice cream, but definitely order it with vanilla.

After four rich, complex dishes, I was doubly inspired - both by Wahlberg's artistry and by a desire for something cooked simply, the way I've eaten for years at restaurants in Italy and at my family's table there, in Florence.

If I'm going to have a rich dish for a primo, I want a simpler secondo, or vice versa. But, except for several great vegetable side dishes, Bridgeman's dinner menu doesn't offer simple fare.

Which is why I ordered what I ordered on my second visit a week later.

It's a Thursday evening and the chef isn't in. I ask for the pan-roasted cod without the almond tomato butter and want to know if I can substitute a vegetable for the basil mashed potatoes.

The kitchen presents me with an uninspired-looking filet of cod that appeared never to have touched any fat. It was, however, wonderfully, surprisingly tasty, with a shot of black pepper in every other bite. It came on a mountain of fresh steamed broccoli rabe with garlic, which needed salt and the rest of the olive oil from our little dipping bowl to make it perfectly satisfying.

My husband's chicken marsala was good, too. The sauce was sweet, musky, dark, the chicken fine, if not inspired. It came, however, on a pile of slightly overcooked orzo.

Having eaten lightly and well gave me plenty of room for the bananas foster (\$8.50). If possible, it was more spectacular than the molten chocolate cake. Sautéed banana slices floated in a caramel sauce over banana bread prepared like French toast. Vanilla ice cream melted into the dish slowly, offering itself up as either something solid and cold or as a second creamy sauce.

On my next visit, I'm planning to start with dessert.

JOAN WILDER