



Sous chef Randall Weed shows off ahi tuna with goat cheese cherry fritter.

**Town Tavern**  
116 W. Fourth St.  
Royal Oak, MI 48067  
248-544-7300

Price: Entrées: \$14-28

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by **Mel Small**  
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EMAIL PRINT

**A bistro in disguise**

When George A. Dondero High School closed last year, Royal Oakers worried that one of its most famous citizens, a very conservative Republican congressman responsible in part for the St. Lawrence Seaway legislation, was destined for the dustbin of history. Their fears were groundless. A life-size photo of Dondero shaking hands with President Eisenhower is featured, along with photos of the Royal Oak High School classes of 1928 and 1936, on the wall of the Town Tavern in Royal Oak.

Bill Roberts, proprietor of the successful Beverly Hills Grill and Streetside Seafood, opened this neighborhood tavern on June 25 in the old Lepanto on Fourth Street in Royal Oak. Although the historic Royal Oak photos and documents that clutter the walls and flat-screen TVs tuned to sporting events suggest booze and burgers, this purposefully misnamed "tavern" is clearly a bistro, marked by an eclectic menu that ranges from macaroni and cheese and iceberg-wedge salad to coconut-almond chicken and Szechuan-accented flatiron steak.

The understated decor reinforces the theme. With his mohair booths and bentwood chairs in shades of brown and art deco wire bread baskets, among other period-suggesting accoutrements, noted restaurant designer Ron Rea created an ersatz 1930s tavern that has been handsomely polished and updated to a 2007 bistro.

Grazers can easily make a hearty meal of the "bar-plate" appetizers averaging around \$8 and the soups and salads around \$5, perhaps throwing in a side of asparagus as a genuflection to a balanced diet. A generous portion of lightly breaded five-spice calamari with Asian aioli or steamed mussels in white wine are representative of the bar plates, while a nicely conceived chopped salad composed of tomato bits, cucumber, radicchio, garbanzo beans and red onions and a vinegary crisp slaw topped with blue cheese are two splendid green choices.

As for the soups, the peppery Manhattan clam chowder, a dense reddish brew full of potatoes and clam bits, may be preferable to the traditional French onion soup topped with melted cheese that salt-sensitive diners might find slightly unappealing.

One of chef Patrick Roettele's most popular main courses is mac and cheese (\$16). This is not your kids' mac and cheese, though, since the longtime chef at the Beverly Hills Grill flecks his creamy mascarpone creation with lobster bits. Another entrée of note is Southwest shrimp (\$20), six sturdy crustaceans, layered over subtle, lime-infused beans and rice that you won't find in Tex-Mex joints.

All four steak choices (\$19-\$28) are somewhat busily sauced, including that old favorite you might have eaten in a 1930s Royal Oak roadhouse, steak Diane. In addition to several fresh seafood fish chalked on the blackboard every day, you can also order a cheeseburger (this is a tavern after all), meatloaf with mashed potatoes, roasted lemon-pepper chicken and panko turkey cutlet. I wonder what U.S. Rep. Dondero would have made of panko?

Many patrons will probably be happy sitting at the long bar, nibbling on appetizers, and drinking a colorful selection of popular beverages. There are chocolate and pomegranate martinis, Paul Newman's lemonade cocktails, and a well-selected array of beer, including Anchor Steam from San Francisco, and six Michigan microbrews. Tavern purists may lament the absence of draft beer.

No Michigan wines appear among the 50 on the interesting West Coast-dominated list, few of which, alas, can be purchased for under \$30. It would make sense for more "neighborhood" restaurants to feature samplings from the state's ever-improving, even award-winning wineries. Michigan whites, particularly the Pinot Grigios and Good Harbor's inexpensive Fishtown White, would certainly enhance the local tavern theme and might even boost our state's sagging economy.

The Town Tavern does use Ray's, Royal Oak's award-winning ice cream, in many of its desserts. The most sinful is the BHG (Beverly Hills Grill) brownie, two warm and moist chocolate cakelets accompanied by a large scoop of Ray's rich vanilla smothered with



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ELLINGTON

Sander's hot fudge.

During its current "trial period," the Town Tavern is not open for lunch.

And, at least for the immediate future, Roberts continues the no-reservation policy that has made his Beverly Hills Grill problematic for impatient diners. However, that policy does not seem to have affected business in Royal Oak. Although the tavern opened with little advertising or fanfare, it has been packing them in, as scores of knowledgeable foodies, not concerned about waiting for a table, are enthusiastic about the prospect of a new Roberts restaurant.

The bustling Town Tavern is very noisy. Every now and then, a train, passing through the heart of downtown Royal Oak a block away, adds to the cacophony. Shades of Ann Arbor's Gandy Dancer, the rumbling rolling stock and the piercing whistle contribute to the tavern's retro experience.

With the opening of the Town Tavern, Royal Oak is on its way back to challenge upstart Ferndale for suburbia's best adult-dining laurels.