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David Burke Prime Steakhouse, Foxwoods Resort & Casino

BY ELISE MACLAY



★★★ [Superior]

In 2008 at a mammoth cocktail bash at Foxwoods I was introduced to celebrity chef David Burke, who, working the room and pressed for time, acknowledged me with a smile and dismissed me with a cryptic nine-word pronouncement: "Someday I want to talk to you about salt."

I haven't seen or communicated with him since. So as my friends and I troop into his iconic restaurant Prime with intent to review, I'm confident that he won't recognize me even if he happens to be on the premises. I have, of course, boned up on the salt reference. According to Prime's website, salt from the Himalayas lines the walls of the restaurant's in-house dry-aging room, where all cuts of meat are aged for 28 to 75 days. If a staff member decides to elaborate on this interesting fact, I am prepared to look impressed because, actually, I am.

I'm also impressed by the size of the dining room: 13,000 square feet, seating 280. Remember the allure of steakhouses that resembled an English barrister's private club? Or, the fun of Wild West cowboy decor? Forget it, man, we're in a casino. What you gotta have is a double shot of over-the-top megawatt wow.

Prime delivers. The glass wine rack is three stories high. The noise level is higher. The pop art pops and the spotlight over our table is so bright I expect the KGB to arrive any minute. Instead, four popovers appear, delivered by a waitperson who instantly disappears. The popovers are gorgeous but they're not hot and they get a lot colder before we manage to procure water, butter, a menu, a drink—anything. I'll quit my bitching—suffice it to say that service throughout the meal leaves a lot to be desired.

But we're here for steaks and steaks there are. That pink Himalayan sea salt in the dry-aging room isn't just for bragging rights. Steaks rule the menu. An 18-ounce rib-eye aged 30 days costs \$51. An 18-ounce rib-eye aged 55 days costs \$58. What's the difference and is it worth it? I don't know, so I decide we should order both and compare.

Before our high-stakes steak-off, we try a few appetizers. With the first bite of kung pao shrimp and beef tips, there's a flood of sweetness followed by a hint of heat. The shrimp are prawn-size and butterflied, the beef tips tender, and the sauce, made with peanuts and cilantro is hot but not too hot, the sweetness a matter of taste.

Surf-and-turf dumplings, some filled with minced lobster, some with shredded barbecued short ribs, are pleasant enough but our Asian friend says she'd like them spicier. I hit the jackpot with a sparkling "chilled ocean cocktail"—half a pound of tender, sweet lobster meat, two ounces of delicious Maryland crab and two jumbo shrimp.

A Caesar salad "prepared tableside" turns out to be a bit of a tease. True, there's a cart laden with accoutrements: olive oil, red wine vinegar, garlic, Dijon mustard, lemon slices, black pepper, chili oil and chives. Chili oil? Chives? And what about anchovies and coddled egg? We consult the server. "They're in the base," he says, shows us a bowl of premixed "Caesar" dressing and invites us to choose doodads to add to it. We eschew chives and chili oil and end up longing for a hint of anchovy. Sorry, Caesar.

Noncarnivores, however, will like the way Prime's Wood Oven Salmon is embellished with shrimp and sweet-pea ragout. Withal, when it comes to lily gilding, the prize has to go to braised short ribs "Stroganoff" in rich, dark gravy over cavatelli and topped with truffled sour cream.

But we're lusting after unadorned dry-aged prime steak in all its naked glory. Let the battle begin. Our waitress, apprised of the contest, supplies two rib-eye steaks, one dry-aged for 30 days, the other for 55, both medium-rare and otherwise identical in thickness, marbling and amount of bone.

With the first bite, the difference in texture is evident. The 30-day steak is tender but chewy; the 55-day steak is buttery. The flavor difference is less dramatic but to me, the longer-aged steak has a richer, deeper, more complex taste that lingers longer in the mouth and is as hard to describe as the bouquet of a beautiful aged Bordeaux.

With a 14-ounce sirloin, 18-ounce bone-in sirloin, 20-ounce filet mignon, 38-ounce porterhouse for two and 40-ounce Chateaubriand for two on the menu, and all meat raised on a farm in Kentucky and transported directly to the restaurant, David Burke Prime is steak maven heaven—with pink salt.

Desserts are toy time for grown-ups— upscale s'mores, a cheesecake lollipop tree, sweet corn custard with blueberry compote (amazingly delicious) and a heady panna cotta jazzed up to taste like piña colada. But the name of the game at Prime is out-of-this-world steak. You can bet on it.

David Burke Prime Steakhouse

Foxwoods Resort Casino, Mashantucket (860/312-8753; davidburkeprime.com)

Monday through Thursday noon to 10:30, Friday and Saturday till 11. Sunday brunch 10 to 2, dinner till 10.

Wheelchair access. Major credit cards. Price range: appetizers \$14 to \$24, entrées \$26 to \$58, desserts \$10 to \$16.