

Friendly staff, creative cuisine are hallmarks of Holland's Piper Restaurant

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By George Aquino



George Aquino | The Grand Rapids

PressMouth-watering entree: Herb-crusted pork roast, stuffed with a sweet and tart dried fruit, is served with a warm potato salad, fresh asparagus and a rosemary-scented pan sauce.

Editor's note: As general manager at the JW Marriott in Grand Rapids, George Aquino's job takes him to destinations around the world, some far-flung, others close-by. Wherever he goes, the food lover, lodging aficionado and writer seeks out the interesting and extraordinary, and he'll share those experiences in his Press column, "Aisle Seat," monthly in the Press' Travel section. In addition, Aquino is surveying the local food scene and sharing his experiences in The Weekend section.

The Sandpiper, as it was known in 1993, was one of a handful of white-tablecloth restaurants in West Michigan during the pre-restaurant boom of the mid-'90s.

It had been 18 years since I set foot inside this scenic restaurant overlooking Lake Macatawa. It is the first restaurant I took my wife, Elena, to when we were dating. While I don't recall what we ate, I do know that the romantic setting helped propel us to get engaged and eventually marry six months later.

New name, new atmosphere

It is renamed The Piper to attract a more casual clientele, and we returned to the restaurant this month to see what has transpired in the almost two decades since that epic visit in 1993. The exterior wood building still looks exactly as I remember.

IF YOU GO

The Piper Restaurant

Where: 2225 South Shore Drive, Holland

Hours: 5-8:30 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday, 5-9 p.m. Friday and Saturday

When we dined: March 3

Wait to be seated: None

Wait for the first course: Five minutes

Dress code: Casual

Ambience: Casual with views of Lake Macatawa

Parking: Free self-parking

Price range: Entrees range from \$9.50 for the Piper Prime Burger to \$25 for the charred beef tenderloin filet.

Credit cards: All major

Alcohol: Full bar

Call them: 335-5866

Connect: Find a complete menu online, piperrestaurant.com.

Call us: Know a great place to dine out? Call The Press Entertainment department at 222-5291, or e-mail weekend@grpress.com.

The interior, with its cornucopia of old framed press articles, nautical-themed artifacts, several Italian vintage poster replica paintings and a floor-to-ceiling mural of the owner's grandson, is certainly a departure from its former, more formal setting.

We were greeted at the door by the smiling face of Pat Eldean, the owner. She escorted us immediately to our corner table on the lower level of the restaurant overlooking the boardwalk.

A warm welcome

First impressions can set the tone for the whole dining experience, and Pat's friendly demeanor is a good example of how it should always be done.

On this Thursday evening, the lower level of the restaurant was half full with what appeared to be regular customers from the surrounding area.

A group of middle-aged men gathered around several high tables in the bar area resembling the 19th hole gathering of a men's golf league in the summer. The restaurant was adequately staffed, and I noticed a good amount of teamwork between the servers and the owner.

I inquired about the 2008 Ridge Vineyards Three Valleys Zinfandel (\$36) from our server Josh, and to my delight, he confidently and eloquently described the characteristics of the wine as a fruit forward zin with earthy minerals and hints of spice.

I started with a cup of the Piper Gumbo (\$4.50), which combined wild-caught shrimp, mushrooms, roasted pepper, wood roasted tomato and herbs in a mouthful of flavor and heat — the perfect antidote to the cold weather outside.

One of my weaknesses is calamari that is either grilled or sauteed. Chef Dan Chudik, of the former Tuscan Express in Cascade, used to make a really delicious, batter-free, calamari, so I got really excited when I saw the seared calamari (\$6.50) on the menu. The Piper's version is beautifully presented with a heaping mound of rings topped with oven-dried tomatoes, pinenuts and served with an avocado citronette.

Unless the avocado is from California, I challenge the kitchen to come up with a more seasonal accompaniment to the calamari. Also, using a griddle to sear the calamari doesn't usually add color to the food as much as grilling or sauteeing in a very hot pan. This was evident when the calamari was presented.

Props to the chef

I ordered the herb-crusted pork roast (\$16.50), which was slow roasted and stuffed with a sweet and tart dried fruit. The pork was served with a warm potato salad, fresh asparagus and a rosemary-scented pan sauce. I give a lot of credit to the chef's creativity, for this dish

came out like a Gourmet Magazine cover. It was mouthwatering and a real value for the price.

Elena's almond-crusted walleye (\$22) was on par with the pork when it came to the presentation. The walleye was served with string vegetables, Yukon mashers and toasted orange butter with capers. While everything on the plate was perfectly cooked, the kitchen was a bit gun-shy with the salt and pepper.

Just desserts

Josh did a wonderful job of selling us on the house specialty dessert, the rum-vanilla caramel flan (\$5.50). As the menu stated, the flan was rich and smooth, and definitely a good way to cap off a good meal.

The Piper has all the characteristics of a well-run restaurant. The friendly and knowledgeable staff, the creativity of the chef and a hands-on owner make this Lake Macatawa restaurant worthy of the 30-minute drive from downtown Grand Rapids all year-round.

E-mail Weekend: weekend@grpress.com