

THE PHOENIX

Burtons Grill

Who says chains can't be enterprising?

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NO CHAIN REACTION HERE: The food at Burtons Grill is surprisingly flavorful.

The menu says Burtons has upscale-casual dining, contemporary American cuisine, and atmosphere. Can you guess one menu item from that description? Would it help if I told you that this is the fourth Burtons Grill — the others being in Hingham and Andover, Massachusetts, and in South Windsor, Connecticut? Are the words “corporate” and “bland” coming into focus? Corporate might be an accurate description, but the food is rather good and not entirely predictable. The chefs (four are credited on the Boston menu) know their stuff and have wangled some top local seafood. Appetizers are inventive, entrées competent, and desserts solid if a bit conservative. The only real letdowns on my visit were side dishes. If there is a hidden agenda, it is that of a “steakhouse,” and there is an accompanying disdain for vegetables that must be addressed.

The breadbasket has hot rolls with a bit of crust, and there is warm herbal butter with lots of garlic. This isn't

brilliant, but it's awfully good eating — better than a lot of brilliant things. Our waiter on one visit touted the sautéed shrimp (\$10). It doesn't read like much on the menu, but the shrimp were nicely handled and tender, and the mix of feta, grilled Italian bread, and stewed tomatoes was very effective. I also liked the addition of grilled shrimp (\$9) on a wedge salad (\$9). The five large shrimp picked up a bit of char flavor without becoming rubbery, and the wedge of iceberg with a blue-cheese-and-balsamic-dribble dressing is an old friend, revived nicely with the addition of bacon. The same bacon in a confetti of corn kernels and finely diced peppers makes a flavorful platform for four succulent pan-seared scallops (\$11).

The clam chowder (\$6) was above average, with the taste of real clams in the broth and a creamy texture without too much cream flavor or starchy shimmer. Mushroom risotto fritters (\$9) are very similar to arancini, but with a mushroom-sauce core in the middle of the fried rice and a bread-crumbs crust that helps preserve the fritters' football shape. A few real porcini in the mushroom center might add more flavor than the pool of marinara sauce in which the fritters were served.

Besides adding protein to a salad, the other way to dine inexpensively at Burtons is to choose from the all-day sandwich menu. I tried a Reuben (\$12.50), which was close to ideal, with excellent seasoned French fries. Chefs usually try to put their own twist on this sandwich, with the understanding that there's one unbreakable rule: a Reuben should be grilled. The chefs at Burtons understand this. However, they've made a few other tweaks. Substituting marble rye for traditional pumpernickel? Sure, I can deal with that. But heaping on corned beef while skipping on sauerkraut and Russian dressing? It may make this sandwich more upscale, but I'm not a fan.

Regular entrées begin with pasta and run up to steaks. Lobster and shrimp pasta (\$21) is a fine version of a clichéd dish, with toothsome seafood in a slightly creamed red sauce and excellent snap-pea pods. The underlying linguini was slightly al dente. A special on cioppino (\$24) was a New England version of the California stew, with shrimp, scallops, lump crab meat, and a bit of scrod in spaghetti sauce. The shells had been removed, but this was still a nicely proportioned dish. A scoop of undercooked rice in the middle, however, was supposed to be basmati; but it looked and tasted more like ultra-long-grain Persian rice. Usually rice is served with gumbo, not cioppino, but it will do if cooked a little longer next time. A special on "haddock imperial" (\$22) was fine local haddock with a somewhat stodgy stuffing of crabmeat and breadcrumbs.

The filet mignon (\$32) tops a group of three steaks cut from "aged Angus beef." I'm guessing they were wet-aged, as the flavor was rich but straightforward. The cut inclined toward tenderness, and you could slice it with a fork. Ordered rare, most of it was served that way. Plus, herb butter added further richness. I also tried a crab cake (\$8/à la carte; \$24/dinner). It was the size of a hamburger and mostly crabmeat.

The only drawbacks to the entrées are pedestrian side dishes. "Seasonal vegetables" were a bland sauté of mostly summer squashes. Broccoli was over-steamed. And the rice was "herbed" — if hot pepper is an herb. I'd favor the baked potato and the seasoned French fries. If you're going to charge \$20 to \$30 for an entrée, the vegetables have to be more notable.

The wine list must be 99 bottles deep, since the special by the glass is "Burtons 100th wine." Only the 100th has a listed vintage year, another down-market practice. One recent 100th wine was the Rodney Strong 2005 "Charlotte's Home" sauvignon blanc (\$9), which was lemony but otherwise dull. I suspect the bottle had been open for a while, always a risk with wines by the glass. A recent beer special was Dogfish Head 60 minute IPA (\$5), probably the hoppiest brew I've had since the first batches of Samuel Adams, and reasonably fresh and aromatic. Wines appear to be typically priced. Tea (\$2.25) is a bag in a cup of hot water, but the decaf coffee (\$2.50) was outstanding.

Desserts are conservative and good. The revival of butterscotch pudding (\$6) gets a big boost here from the addition of brickle. Key lime pie (\$8) is heavier than some, though still creamy. It approaches cheesecake in flavor, but with distinctive key-lime sourness. And vanilla-bean crème brûlée (\$7) is very successful and strong on the vanilla.

Service on both early-evening visits was very good; what happens on Red Sox game days, I don't want to know. One server did try to up-sell us a couple of times more than necessary. The rooms, in the new Trilogy building, are attractively retro, with a kind of sub-Miro design painted on the walls.

Burtons Grill | 1363 Boylston Street, Boston | Open Mon–Thurs, 11:30 am–11 pm; Fri & Sat, 11:30 am–midnight; and Sun, 11:30 am–10 pm. Open an hour early on Red Sox–game days | AE, DC, DI, MC, VI | Full bar | Valet parking, \$12 | Street-level access | 617.236.2236

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