

Potter: New steak on the block: Burtons Grill
By Billie Jean Potter/ Joy of Eating

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Can a restaurant be graded solely on the basis of its cheeseburger?

A singular burger is undoubtedly too narrow a sample, especially for a full-service steak house, but if it were OK to judge it this way, then Burtons Grill-and the eponymous Burtons Burger-would rank highly in this reviewer's notebook. On a lunch trip to the newcomer in North Andover, we discovered a potential beef addiction not lessened by the other excellent offerings on Burtons' extensive menu.

Burtons Grill is a newcomer to the Boston restaurant scene. Part of a two (soon-to-be three) restaurant chain, the concept behind the restaurant is a steak house with a downtown feel but with more reasonable prices and accessible suburban locations. Our bartender said it best: "We want to be as good as the Capital Grille but not at their prices."

Co-owner Kevin Rowell says the idea behind Burtons was to offer a good deal on a good meal.

"We wanted to be a breath of fresh air," says Rowell. "Our idea was to have a well-rounded, balanced wine list with fair prices. Same with the food-full of flavor but with value."

And Executive Chef Denise Baron has brought the vision to life.

"Hiring Denise was the best decision we made," say Rowell. "She's passionate about food-she dreams recipes in her sleep." And many of her creations are indeed dreamy, with nary a nightmare on the menu.

Back to that burger. The sirloin (from high-end purveyor Dole & Bailey in Woburn) was cooked to medium-rare perfection. It was juicy, flavorful, and even better with the soft, buttered ciabatta roll. A choice of cheeses, applewood smoked bacon, sautéed mushrooms and onions are all available. Hand-cut fries, prepared on the premises rounded out the meal, golden, with skin intact, and cut imperfectly perfect. The place on a blustery Wednesday afternoon was packed, with both the dining room and the bar buzzing and full.

The same was true on a return trip on a Monday night. Every table was full-the restaurant holds approximately 120 seats; there were no empty places at the bar at 7:30 p.m. A Monday night? In North Andover? Testimony that the food is worth the trip and the locale is ripe for the offerings.

While waiting at the bar for the rest of our party to arrive, the Secret Sommelier of our group observed the following: "This is a great bar. It's pleasantly crowded with a nice buzz. The wine list tries to cover the world in wines by the glass, which is very good for trying more than one type. There are 99 bottles on the wine list, and the 100th is always a special every day."

She noted that by the glass there were three Chardonnays, an Italian Pino Gris, a Riesling from Germany, and a Sauvignon Blanc for the whites. (Her sage suggestion was to replace the lesser Hess Select (\$7) Chard for a crisper French-style white.) Red wine offerings were equally as robust: a Napa Cabernet Sauvignon (Hess Select, \$7), a Monte Antico Sangiovese (\$7), and a reserve Morende Pinot Noir from Chile (\$9). There were also 15 beer offerings as well as signature cosmos and martinis. The glass encased wine cellar, open for viewing, was impressive. We had to prevent the Secret Sommelier from leaving nose prints on the glass as we moved to our table.

The space at Burtons is open, modern, and clean. The colors create a feeling of urban tranquility-taupes, browns, olives, with abstract shapes painted on the walls. The open kitchen is immaculate, and a flurry of activity. The lighting is perfect-not too bright, not too dim. Tables are spaced appropriately, and there's plenty of natural light. Come summer, there will be al fresco dining at tables surrounding the restaurant on the patio outside.

Happily ensconced in our spacious booth, we set out to sample the non-burger items. The special clam appetizer (\$12) got us in the mood: crunchy, not greasy, with a piquant tartar sauce reminiscent of Russian dressing, with sweet and tender medium-sized clams. They were gone in a nanosecond.

Next came the wedge salad (\$8): iceberg lettuce, ripe tomatoes, Roquefort dressing, red onions, applewood-smoked bacon, and Great Hill blue cheese. "Nice and cold and crisp," said one member of our party. "Smoky and onion-y," offered another. Even in early spring, the tomatoes were tasty.

Hit number-two. Then a sesame-crusting tuna (\$12). It had fresh ginger and wasabi, as well as a cucumber, onion and pepper salad. Perhaps a bit too much dressing, but the tuna was of excellent quality, and the dish overall created a "maki roll" taste that everyone enjoyed.

One enthusiastic taster proclaimed: "A party in my mouth!" All appetizers were generous in their proportions. Somewhat satiated, we asked our server to hold our entrée orders for 10 minutes or so; her word was as good as gold. We weren't rushed, and had sufficient time to anticipate the next course.

Sadly leaving the burger memory behind, this reviewer ordered the bronzed salmon with Israeli cous cous and zucchini with peppers (\$18). The fish was sweet and beautifully cooked. Mahi Mahi (\$21) also pleased—a generous portion, moist, perfectly seasoned. One diner mournfully wished for mashed potatoes as a side, which are not offered. Other side offerings—each included as part of a main entrée—include the hand-cut fries; (not as good this time as lunch); cucumber salad; cous cous; herbed rice; seasonal vegetables; coleslaw; and baked potato. Tasters liked the cole slaw, which was crunchy with a fresh flavor from the parsley. And then the beef. The New York strip (\$29) was a good cut, with a wet-aged taste. The filet (\$28) was tender, and true to its mild flavoring. The suggestion was to use a bit more seasoning on this excellent cut, or perhaps a sauce or two.

We had a bottle of the Dunn Vineyards 2002 Cabernet Sauvignon, which was an excellent accompaniment to the beef. OK, and the fish. (A great wine goes with everything.)

For dessert, we shared the mint chocolate cake (\$8). It had a mint grenache layered between chocolate cake, and was topped with hot fudge and whipped cream. What's not to like? The vanilla bean crème brûlée (\$7) was also good, infused with bourbon vanilla beans. Other offerings included a key lime pie (\$7), chocolate mousse (\$7), and hot fudge sundae (\$6) with whipped cream and Heath Bar crunch. The dessert list is manageable, and comfort-food appropriate to the rest of the menu.

So is Burtons the "Capital Grille without the price?" Yes and no. The expectation and experience of the two are quite different. But I don't want to go to the Capital Grille all that often, and I certainly don't want to spend what I'd spend at the Capital regularly.

Burtons lives up to its owners' vision of being a quality spot in the suburbs, complete with ambiance and solidly good food. I'd go quite frequently. Especially for that cheeseburger. . .

Just the Facts:

Burtons Grill

145 Turnpike St. (Route 114), North Andover

978-688-5600

Hours: Mon. through Thurs. 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m.; Fri. and Sat. 11:30 a.m. to 11 p.m.; Sun. 11:30 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Cuisine: Contemporary American cuisine.

Price Range: Appetizers from \$6 to \$12. Entrees from \$9 (grilled chicken sandwich) to \$29 (New York strip steak).

Reservations: Recommended.

Liquor: Full bar and lounge.

Payment: Major credit cards accepted.

Parking: Plentiful. Restaurant is part of Eaglewood Shoppers complex.

Handicapped Access: Yes.

Other Locations: Hingham, MA (Derby Street Shoppes) and coming spring 2006 in South Windsor, CT (The Shops at Evergreen Walk).