

Sam's Place

Sam Snead's Tavern is a new, but historic, place to dine at Shawnee Inn and Golf Resort

By WILLIAM NOBLE

Golf buffs will recall the 1938 PGA Championship, where little Paul Runyan bested long-hitting Sam Snead for the title. That tournament was played at Shawnee Inn and Golf Resort, which still sits off I-80, only two exits (and a couple of miles) into Pennsylvania when traveling from the Garden State.

Snead's presence is being felt again at Shawnee, this time in a triumphant way, with the three-tiered Sam Snead's Tavern that sits at the resort's entrance and is a worthy—and recent—addition to the premises.

A large photo of Snead and Runyan adorns one of the restaurant walls, as do other items commemorating Sam's career. "Jack Snead, Sam's son, gave us two boxes of his father's memorabilia when we decided to open the restaurant in August, 2004 [two years after Sam's death at age 89]," says part owner Jonathan Kirkland, mentioning it's one of 14 Sam Snead Taverns in the United States.

Most of the food preparation is over an oak-wood fire, providing a smoky flavor reminiscent of rural, out-of-doors cuisine appropriate to Snead's upbringing in the mountains of Virginia. The menu spells it out: "oak grilled specialties," but the choices are more than simple "chophouse" favorites. While beef is prominent, there's also seafood: Atlantic salmon and mahi-mahi, which thrive in the oak-fired grilling.

"A lot of the people who come here haven't experienced this particular smoky-type flavor before," says Chef Joe DiGiacinto, who received his culinary training at Johnson and Wales University in Rhode Island and who has been here since the restaurant opened. "Whatever we grill here is cooked over the oak-wood fire."

He supplements the regular menu with specials, including a dinner portion of the lump crab cake as well as pan-crust chicken with parmesan on a bed of pasta and oak-wood-grilled rib eye enhanced with baby bella mushrooms and served with red skin, garlic mashed potatoes.



Sam Snead's Tavern offers casual but fine dining with a beautiful view.

The appetizers offer an eclectic mix. There's chicken quesadilla with the chicken specially oak-grilled, buffalo shrimp served in classic Buffalo-picante wing sauce, and jumbo lump crab cake served with remoulade sauce. An unusual choice is called, simply, "Sam's Chili," and at first it seems the usual dish, but one taste shows the difference. There's more meat and there are no beans! Chili without beans? It's here, a raft of chopped onions providing the tang and melted cheddar cheese giving it the smoothness.

A specialty appetizer (and the most expensive) is tuna sashimi, seared and served rare. Carved into postage stamp-sized portions and encrusted with sesame, it's offered with soy horseradish sauce, wasabi, and ginger, beautifully presented on a slice of lemon. Its freshness is apparent. "Our tuna has to be top-notch, especially for sashimi," says DiGiacinto. "If it isn't, I send it back." He also mentions that dinner guests at Sam Snead's regularly consume more tuna than any other area restaurant. "My fish representative tells me that."

The salad offerings are varied. From an oak-grilled chicken, cheese, and nut salad; to the redoubtable Cobb salad with its bacon, chicken, and blue cheese crumbles; to an apple, almond chicken salad drizzled



with grapefruit vinaigrette, they represent a fulsome accompaniment to an oak-fired meal. In addition to the grapefruit vinaigrette (tangy but not overwhelmingly so) the salad dressings are the customary assortment and are homemade.

The wine list is modest with standard varietals. For the whites, it's chardonnay, savignon blanc, pinot grigio, and reisling; a couple of choices of each; for the reds, it's shiraz, merlot, cabernet sauvignon, pinot noir, and zinfandel; again, a couple of choices of each. Most come from California, but Australia, New Zealand, Italy, and Washington State are also represented, and all are available by the bottle or the glass.

As with the sauces and the dressings, all desserts are made on premises and while the number of choices is modest, the portions are generous. Chocolate desserts are obvious favorites. There's the Ghirardelli chocolate cake with a warm, hot fudge center, and the two-person "chocolate sack," actually a chocolate tower, filled with sponge cake and white chocolate mousse, topped with raspberry puree and whipped cream. "For sharing," the menu advises. Then, there's the key lime pie and someone has done their homework because the graham cracker crust is true, authentic Key West!

Don't let the "tavern" in the restaurant name set the tone for this adventure in eating. With dining-room views of the meandering Bennekill outside the windows and glimpses of the Shawnee Inn and Golf Resort's championship course through the trees, Sam Snead would be satisfied. Casual but fine dining it is, and with the memorabilia, it seems like a friendly museum, too. ■

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