

Restaurants

# Rugby Grille puts the 'fine' in fine dining

In the mad rush toward casual dining in stripped-down settings, there are notable holdouts. The Townsend Hotel's Rugby Grille, for instance, is not about to relinquish its heavy linens, silver chargers and niceties of service.

The restaurant in the Birmingham hotel is an oasis of civility, complete with fresh flowers, paintings and gleaming dark woodwork that would be at home in an English country house, and an overall sense of elegance.

It's a surprisingly intimate room, and that adds to its appeal. Seating is also offered in what seems pretty much like a glorified hallway at the entrance to the room, and that space lacks the seductive atmosphere of the clubby room itself.

Its Old World ambiance does not mean that the menu trots out a list of dishes from bygone days. No, in the hands of David Gilbert, listed on the menu as "restaurant chef," and Jim Barnett, executive chef, it's an up-to-date list with touches of chef Gilbert's California experience.

While there certainly are classics, from the house French onion soup, steak tartare and Dover sole meuniere, the menu has a bright contemporary spin, especially at dinner.

Diners may choose one of the chef's "composed plates," each garnished with appropriate accompaniments, almost all of which are \$36. An outstanding example is the citrus-roasted Alaskan black sable atop a crepinette of Maine crabmeat on a plate swirled with a carrot ginger reduction and slim sticks of honey-glazed carrots.

Another is rack of lamb with an apricot, basil and pine nut

crust that is teamed with porcini mushroom, tomato confit and sherry vinegar salad. Mustard spaetzle and braised radicchio round out the plate.

On one recent evening, it seemed that a majority of the guests were opting for the Dover sole, whisked to the tables on a linen-covered cart and de-boned and served from the saute pan — and I suspect it's that style of tableside presentation that really gives this dish its appeal.

There are plenty of a la carte choices, of course, including a small selection of prime steaks, from filet mignon to Delmonico, none, by the way, any larger than 14 ounces. (I suspect the professional sports teams who stay at the Townsend head for Troy's steak row when they want a slab of beef.)

The menu does not neglect desserts, and they include a version of chocolate lava cake, this one with a white chocolate truffle center, cherry compote and chocolate ice cream; a trio of profiteroles with fillings of white chocolate/raspberry, coffee and banana caramel praline ice cream with a trio of sauces; and an interesting hot English toffee pudding with vanilla bean custard, ice cream and caramel sauce.

Because it is in a hotel, the Rugby Grille serves all three meals, starting at dawn, when the menu includes classic egg dishes from omelets and frittatas



MOLLY ABRAHAM



Ricardo Thomas / The Detroit News

Waiter Tom Straker attends to a group of lunch customers. A high standard of service is maintained all day.

to Benedicts, as well as pancakes, Belgian waffles and French toast — an elegant French toast made with Kahlua-scented mascarpone cheese over coffee-flavored creme Anglaise.

But even at breakfast, there's a touch of California in the grilled chicken and green chili burrito with tomatillo salsa and black beans, and, of course, all the amenities of linens and service are maintained even at the very early hour.

And that bears out the theme here: the kind of polished service and meticulously prepared food that elevates a meal to an experience.

We can talk all we want about preferring elbows-on-the-table informality, but there is something special about going to a fine restaurant that maintains the kind of standards that are becoming more and more difficult to find.

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Review

**Rugby Grille**

Townsend Hotel, 100 Townsend Street, Birmingham 48009 (248) 642-5999



(Outstanding)

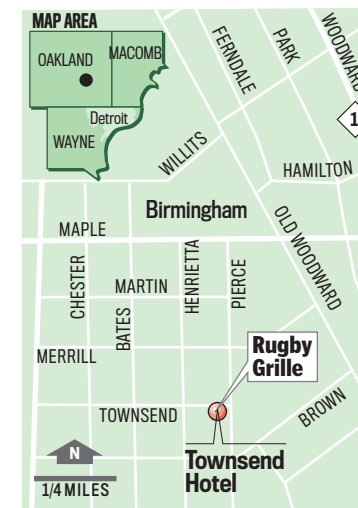
**Hours:** 6:30 a.m.-midnight Sun.-Thurs., 6:30 a.m.-1 a.m. Fri.-Sat. **Prices:** Breakfast \$11-\$24, lunch and weekend brunch \$15-\$24, sandwiches \$15-\$18, dinner appetizers \$16-\$22, soups, salads and vegetables \$7-\$14, entrees \$32-\$44, desserts \$8; five-course tasting menu \$75.

**Credit cards:** All major.

**Liquor:** Full bar and an extensive wine list.

**Smoking:** No.

**Parking:** Valet or nearby municipal



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structure.

**Wheelchair access:** No barriers

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