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MOLLY'S PICKS 110 // WINE COLUMN 111 // RESTAURANT LISTINGS 115

Talented Team

Birmingham's **Rugby Grille** moves into the big leagues with a fresh lineup of players

// By Christopher Cook

Whenever a top restaurant changes its chef, it deserves another look. So it is with Rugby Grille, the restaurant in the elegant Townsend Hotel in Birmingham.

The Townsend is the king of hotels in the Detroit area, a place where stars of all stripes stay when in town, from Mick Jagger to entire sports teams, such as the L.A. Lakers. It's a place that justifiably prides itself on its polish and refinement.

Although Rugby Grille has toyed over the years with contemporary cooking, the accolades it has accrued have been more about fine steak dining than gourmet cuisine.

The spot also has made all requisite Top 10 lists, and it was named this magazine's Restaurant of the Year in 2000.

But the arrival a year ago of Executive Chef Jim Barnett began a very quiet shift at the restaurant toward more serious dining, one that has become particularly visible in the dinner menu.

Barnett was executive corporate chef at the Matt Prentice Restaurant Group, responsible for the menus, kitchens, and service at restaurants that included Shiraz, Northern Lakes Seafood, Coach Insignia, and the now-closed Morels. Today, Barnett oversees the Townsend's array of catering, banquet, and restaurant facilities.

A few months before Barnett's arrival, the hotel also hired David Gilbert to be the new chef for Rugby Grille.

A native of Milford, Gilbert left the area to attend school at the Culinary Institute of America in New York, and then worked at a few very select restaurants in France and California,



> **FRUIT OF THE SEA** Seared day-boat Hawaiian tuna sashimi and wakame salad with ponzu, fresh oranges, and cilantro.



assembling an impressive résumé that goes a long way to explaining the changes under way.

As much as Barnett and Gilbert have tag-teamed upward the quality of Rugby Grille in just one year, it's Gilbert's skill at dinner each night that's really making it sparkle.

Gilbert's food is exciting. It has sharpness and distinction of flavors at perfect pitch, to use a musical metaphor. All dishes begin with raw ingredients. Flavors must be skillfully isolated and kept vibrant all the way through the cooking process and onto the plate. But not all chefs can do it, and when it works, as it does here, it reflects a high level of skill, training, and instinct.

Take Gilbert's handling of a first course of foie gras. The retired Milos Cihelka of the long-closed Golden Mushroom understood and handled foie gras better than anyone in Detroit. But Gilbert is possibly better.

As Barnett says: "David has the most wonderful torchon de foie gras I've ever had."

It comes in two parts. Part one is a pan-seared goose liver, placed in a delicate *vol-au-vent*, the lightest of puffy pastry, which its very name suggests should be light enough to be blown away by a gust of wind.

The inside of a *vol-au-vent* is traditionally brushed lightly with some sort of sauce just before the warm meat — sometimes chicken or beef, but goose liver here — is dropped into it at the last minute and rushed to the table.

Gilbert brushes his pastry with an almond cream and places a piece of delicately poached white peach in with the seared foie gras. The other half of this first course is three slices from a "torchon" of foie gras pieces, a latter-day terrine of goose liver tightly wrapped in cloth (*torchon* means towel in French) and then steamed in a bath of veal broth. When cold, it's sliced and served with a black cherry "jelly," and spread on toasted brioche.

Gilbert's foie gras is succulent, with a creamy richness that fills the mouth with delicate, intense flavors that melt away slowly, leaving a golden glow. Many



chefs can make it. Few succeed like this. And, it's no wonder.

Gilbert seems almost to have sneaked back into Detroit unnoticed, through a back door. Before the Rugby Grille, Gilbert was at L'Astrance, one of the newest shooting-star, chef-driven restaurants to reach hyper fame in Paris. For three years, he worked under its chef-owner, Pascal Barbot (formerly of Paris' famous Arpège.)

L'Astrance was an instant success. In 2001, it made it into the pantheon of French dining, receiving its first star from the blueblood Michelin Guide. A second star followed in 2005, by which time Gilbert was Barbot's chef-de-cuisine. (The most that Michelin awards is three stars. There are only 54 three-star places worldwide.)

Gilbert's route to France began in Milford, where he got his first job in his teens working for Brian Polcyn at Five Lakes Grill. From there, he took his culinary training in New York, which led to a kitchen position at the French Laundry in Napa, today recognized as one of the top three or four restaurants in this country.

Gilbert then went to southwestern France, to a job with Michel Bras at the restaurant that bears his name in Laguiole, a town better known here for its very trendy specialty pointed dinner-table knives with handles made of goat horn.

Bras, a super-chef, loner, philosopher, and environmentalist, has been accorded almost iconic status in a generation of French star cooks who have dominated European — and worldwide fine dining — for more than a decade: Alain Chapel, Michel Guerard, Claude Verger,



> BEEFED UP Clockwise from top left: Braised Wagyu beef short rib over braised red cabbage, fondue of Bartlett pear, and salad of fall vegetables in a beet-infused red-wine sauce. Chef David Gilbert (foreground) and Executive Chef Jim Barnett at work. Strawberry-rhubarb dome with lemon-verbena "blondie" cake with vanilla mascarpone ice cream.



Alain Ducasse, Joel Robuchon, the late Bernard Loiseau and others.

In addition, Gilbert landed a job for several months in the kitchen of Martin Berasategui in San Sebastian, Spain, whose deconstructionist cooking has made him one of the great innovators and stylists in cooking today.

In late 2005, Gilbert returned home after four years. "I came back to Milford to visit my family," Gilbert says, "and while I was here I heard they were looking for a chef at the Townsend."

Altogether, these are stunning notches on a résumé for any young chef, and they go a long way to explain why the food at Rugby Grille is suddenly so interesting.

It would be incautious to make too much of Gilbert at this point. So, the disclaimer in this tale is that this restaurant is a work in progress, but worth watching closely.

The menu at Rugby Grille is not yet totally remade, and may not be. At dinner it still retains some of its steakhouse standard items: Dover sole, crab cakes, shrimp cocktail, prime rib, and steaks with a choice of sauces: béarnaise, bordelaise, and others.

But the Barnett-Gilbert influence has clearly been gaining. His appetizer of black truffle and lobster risotto with a celery root purée and mascarpone is not to be missed: a delicate balance of flavors that also has that perfect pitch. The same goes for a cold lobster salad he offered last fall.

Other "must" menu items: the veal chop served over a bolognaise of porcini mushrooms, cipolini onions, tomato confit, and pancetta; Maine diver scallops on a cauliflower mousse with capers and almonds; braised Wagyu short rib meat on a braised red cabbage, and a fondue of Bartlett pear; a superb Norwegian salmon with a butternut squash confit and wild chanterelle mushrooms; a "citrus-roasted" black cod over a curried crab in a crépinette — a kind of flat crab sausage.

> FISH WITH FINESSE

Clockwise, from top left: Citrus-roasted black cod served with a curried jumbo lump Maine crabmeat crépinette and carrot-ginger reduction. The dining room and décor at Rugby Grille would benefit from a renovation.



Barnett has brought in consultant and master sommelier Ron Edwards to stock anew a rather dysfunctional wine list, and Mario Plaza has taken over as the restaurant's general manager.

I'm betting that all these changes are also going to present a big challenge for the Townsend. As a super-steakhouse, Rugby Grille got away with what, in my opinion, has always been a second-rate location. Part bar, part converted hallway, its venue has never been top-restaurant caliber.

Now the food is beginning to run way ahead of the place in which it is being served.

The décor is, frankly a rather dated and silly Ralph Lauren-ish imitation of an English club. And then there's the bar, which dominates the dining room. No matter where you sit, the bar is always only a few feet away.

On one of our visits, two very loud, inebriated young women held court, as three men of a Cialis age jockeyed to be their new best friends.

As one of the women detailed how drunk her friend was the previous night, complete with retching sounds, our waiter strategically placed himself between the bar and our table, and with a pained look announced the specials of the day.



The other part of the dining room is "The Gallery." A rose that by any other name would be called "The Hallway," which is exactly what it looks like, feels like, and is: the hall to the bathroom and a side door.

It's a very strange "dining room" for Detroit's most polished hotel.

Let's hope that changes, because with all that has lined up so far at the Rugby Grille, we are looking at what could be the most exciting new restaurant in Detroit.

100 Townsend St., Birmingham; 248-642-7900. *L & D* daily. ■

Cook is the chief restaurant critic of Hour Detroit magazine. E-mail: editorial@hourdetroit.com.