

Pricier Saddle Creek remains a good bet

BY JENNIFER CHRISTMAN ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Reviewing Saddle Creek Woodfired Grill when it opened a little more than two years ago, we marveled at the multitalented eatery's \$18.95 price ceiling and we wondered how long it would last.

Well, not two years.

The Cowboy Ribeye, the priciest item now available at the Montana-fashioned restaurant that melds chain appeal (while it's the only one of its kind, it is owned by the Colton's Steak House folks) with a unique feel, costs nearly twice the former limit at \$32. And several other steaks cost more than \$20. But much of the broad all-day menu of chicken, ribs, seafood, pasta, burgers, sandwiches, pizza and salads still costs less than \$20, and a few items are less than \$10.

Other than a shift in pricing and a chiseling of the menu (Bacon and Scallion Sea Scallops, we hardly knew ya), not much else has changed at the restaurant where the charm falls somewhere between elegant lodge and hunter chic, and where a fireplace and light fixtures wearing antlers lend the dim space a warm glow. Service is competent.

We could nitpick about some faults we found with the food (and we will), but before our conclusion gets lost in the details, let us first say that we believe in this restaurant. It's a decent place to dine with friends and family and is certainly one of North Little Rock's better bets. Saddle Creek tries hard, and often succeeds.

One of the hits we sampled was the rich, soothing, Smoked Corn Chowder (\$4). Another was the better-than-average-in-Arkansas Crab Cakes starter (\$9), of two savory shellfish-hefty patties served with a spicy remoulade (and the me part of me is from Maryland where we don't give crustacean compliments lightly). The sweet, crisp Coconut Shrimp (\$9) served with a mango chutney are terrific.

While we don't usually get too excited about house salads (\$5), Saddle Creek's mix of greens and cherry tomatoes joined by candied chili nuts and a perky cilantro lime vinaigrette is delightful.

As for entrees, we also enjoyed the thick, smoky Maple-Mustard Glazed Pork Chop (\$17), if the garnish of fried onions was excessively salty. Maybe the seasoning was a bit overpowering and there was a lot happening on the plate (also piled with mashed potatoes, a creamy corn mush and green beans), but the almost-rare as requested Seared Ahi Tuna Steak (\$18) satisfied. The Roasted Prime Rib (\$18 for a 12-ounce cut, \$23 for a 16-ounce) was soft and juicy.

Other items had potential, but just didn't thrill.

The slick Spinach & Artichoke Dip (\$7), served with tri-color chips, had too much grease and no pizzazz.

A full rack of Smoked Baby Back Ribs (\$19) had a decent flavor but an inconsistent texture. Some were tender; others were tough. A pasty clump of Garlic Mashed Potatoes (which accompany some meals or can be selected as the side that comes with a steak or can be ordered alone for \$3) did not taste fresh.

The Cowboy Ribeye (\$32) was a mighty slab (20 to 22 ounces) of bone-in beef that was grilled to a perfect medium, but had very little flavor, let alone the "bold" flavor the menu boasted.

A \$32 steak shouldn't require steak sauce, nor should it require an upgrade via the toppings Saddle Creek offers, from Bleu Cheese to Bearnaise, for an additional \$3 charge.

Two things we didn't get around to trying this time: dessert (food this macho is too filling) and the patio (it was just too cold). We will have to wait until we're back in the Saddle again.