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While we've never been to Montana, what we know about it makes us believe the old saw: A nice place to visit, but you wouldn't want to live there. Sure, they've got buffalo herds, solitude and the Rocky Mountains. But they've also got bone-chilling cold, emptiness, 20 miles between you and your neighbors, no cell phone reception and not a mocha latte in sight. While we know that kind of thing is popular with the excess-testosterone set, we'll take the Disneyland version any day.

Which brings us to Saddle Creek Woodfired Grill in North Little Rock. In the space where Mexico Chiquito once made-believe it was south of the border, Saddle Creek's shtick is "Montana Hunting Lodge," which means stinky feet, empty beer cans and drunken guys named "Bud" accidentally catching their coveralls on fire.

Wait. Sorry. That's "Arkansas Hunting Lodge."

As seen at Saddle Creek, Montana Hunting Lodge is that "Legends of the Fall" look: exposed stone, hewn timbers, leather seats and fixtures made from whatever couldn't be turned into a splint for a broken leg or boiled down and eaten. They even managed to wrestle a buffalo head onto the wall (you can't miss him; he's pretty much the first thing you see when you walk in, hanging there with a "what did I ever do to deserve this?" look). We were kind of surprised they didn't offer us the opportunity to hunt down and kill our meal in the parking lot with a sharpened stick. Still, we have to admit that at night — antler-heavy surroundings aside — the decor manages to be as warm, cozy and inviting as anyone could want.

As you know, however, surroundings are always secondary to this reviewer. Coming from a family of the big-boned, we learned early on to eat defensively: head down and steak knife at the ready for any plate-wandering hands. Decor? We don't got time for no stinkin' decor. If the food is good, we could probably eat from a rusty hubcap in the Hanoi Hilton and still give the place a fair-to-middlin' review.

From Saddle Creek's extensive list of appetizers (featuring such oddities for Montana as crab cakes, coconut shrimp and cast iron skillet mussels — but, we might add, no cheese dip) we went for what appeared to be the most boring choice and tried the spinach and artichoke dip (\$5.95). Served still bubbling with multi-colored chips, it was pretty much what we expected, though the wood-fired oven gave it — and everything we ate that night — a nice hint of smoky flavor you just can't get anywhere else. It was soon demolished.

The entree menu was even larger than we have come to expect from most grill-'n'-steak places, with a big slate of pastas, chicken three different ways (wood-fired, smoked or pan fried in a cast-iron skillet), fish, wood-fired pizzas (\$7.45-\$8.95), prime rib, sandwiches, salads — even St. Louis-style ribs (\$15.95 for a full rack). Prices, however, were not as expansive, with nothing on the menu topping \$20, and most entrees running around \$10.

Being that we were on someone else's dime, however, we did it up in high style. For myself, I selected the 14-ounce Montana rib eye (a more than reasonable \$16.45), while Companion tried the blackened salmon fillet (\$13.95), which came with a citrus-honey glaze and a side of grilled squash and zucchini. What surprisingly didn't come with either of our entrees (though Companion added one for \$2.95) was the house Caesar salad. Though excellently done with a tangy dressing, it's just duded-up lettuce folks. Can't you spare a little?

Both our meals arrived quickly and hot, surprising since the place was so full. One bite of Companion's salmon proved it to be fine; firm and flaky, nicely accompanied — though not drowned — by the just-sweet-enough glaze. Even though we both nibbled at it throughout the evening, the portion was big enough that most of it was boxed up and taken home in the end. The steak, too, was one of the best I've had in awhile. Perfectly cooked to a medium-rare, it was juicy, thick and flavorful, with a nice marinade and the sweet smoky flavor that put a bit of extra oomph into the spinach dip appetizer. For steak connoisseurs, it's enough of a difference in flavor to warrant a trip. For both the reviewer and Companion, it was all enough that we flagged off the waitress when she came round offering dessert. It was either that or rub it directly on our bellies, as there was no more room left.

Being longtime fans of the Lakewood Mexico Chiquito, we nearly cried in our enchiladas when we heard the place had shut its doors last year. A trip to Saddle Creek proves its successor is a worthy replacement, and a great new addition to Little Rock/North Little Rock's mid-level restaurant scene, especially for the steak lovers among us. We'll be back, and soon.

Saddle Creek Woodfired Grill
Four stars
2703 Lakewood Village
North Little Rock
812-0883

Quick bite

Martini lovers will definitely want to put Saddle Creek on their "to do" list. With 13 versions of the classic drink (some which 007 would most definitely

not approve of — like the “Infused Martini,” with orange vodka, triple sec, fresh pineapple and mint leaves), they can shake or stir everyone’s expectations.

Hours

4 p.m.-10:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 4 p.m.-11 p.m. Friday through Saturday, 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Sunday

Other information

Moderate prices. All credit cards accepted. Full bar and wine list.