



Fireside Grill: Surprising Suburban Sophistication

The new Fireside Grill in Lorton is a winner, and it would be a winner anywhere in the Washington area. That it is located in a suburban shopping center not far from Amtrak's Auto Train station makes it rather remarkable. Most new suburban restaurants aren't nearly so ambitious, or so accomplished.

Fireside Grill, which opened in April, is the anchor of the town center of the new Lorton Station community. It is a sprawling semi-circular space that breathes life into the restaurant's fiery theme. A wood-fired oven is the centerpiece of the huge, open kitchen that dominates one side of the restaurant. The heat theme continues to play out in the colors of the walls (shades of red, orange and bright yellow), the seating (the banquettes are salmon and red-orange, and chair seats are the same red-orange) and in the pendant lighting. The only smoke is from the cooking area; this is a non-smoking restaurant.

The kitchen is in the open but is shielded from diners by a high serving counter. A glance at the wide-ranging menu, which includes flatbread pizzas, pasta, steaks, seafood and specialties such as meatloaf, makes one wonder if this young kitchen can pull it off. So far, the answer is yes.

Owner Kostas Daskalakis was trained and educated as an environmental chemist, but his love of restaurants finally won out over his government job. He had a background in the food industry. He came to the United States because his uncle was chef at the Greek Embassy in Washington for years, and he spent his youth and college days working both for his uncle's catering operations and for restaurants. He has owned the Hopsfrog Grill in Burke since the mid-1990s.

Twenty years ago, when both were working at the Bread & Chocolate in Chevy Chase, Daskalakis met chef Tony Lagana, who had apprenticed at L'Auberge Chez Francois in Great Falls. Since then, Lagana ventured into corporate product development for Kraft Foods and now has a Florida consulting company that continues to do work for Kraft and Nestle.

Lagana developed the dishes for Fireside Grill at his Florida test kitchen, and they are carried out here by chef Jamison Clark. Just don't expect chain-style food.

The flatbread pizza was our first indication that Fireside Grill is something special. The long, rectangular flatbread is more bread than pizza dough, pleasantly chewy



PHOTOS BY TRACY A. WOODWARD — THE WASHINGTON POST

The Filet Merlot at Fireside Grill, in the new Lorton Station community.

without the sometimes heavy yeasty taste. It's topped with a smear of sun-dried tomato pesto, then fontina cheese and finally a sprinkle of slices of wild mushroom, and it is heavenly. The flatbread pizza is more akin to the individual Spanish pizza known as cocas than anything you might get at an American pizza place.

Although you can order the flatbread with a variety of toppings, including jerk chicken and steak and cheese, we stayed with simpler combinations including chorizo and peppers and marinara sauce with four cheeses. All were delightful.

And then there was the tuna appetizer, an item that seems to be on every restaurant's menu these days and is rarely worth the effort. Don't make such an assumption here. The seared tuna was flawless, a chunk of sushi-grade tuna that really tasted of the sea, without any of that connective tissue that often mars such dishes. The dish was perfectly cooked, but more importantly, the basic ingredients were top-notch.

Likewise, tender chicken skewers were juicy and flavorful, though the sauce was too sweet, and that

sweetness was a recurring theme in other dishes.

Baby-back ribs were the only real disappointment. The two generous slabs of ribs were cooked to mush, with texture-less meat falling off the bones and a sauce that seems to have come from a jar of breakfast preserves.

Other entrees were much more satisfying. The pot roast was generous chunks of chuck steak, slow-cooked until tender and swimming in a garlic-tomato brown sauce with wild mushrooms, potatoes and carrots. It was comfort-food good.

The Filet Merlot, the most popular item on the menu, was a petite filet mignon, served atop a portobello mushroom, caramelized onions and mashed potatoes shaded orange by the addition of cheddar cheese. Even this sauce was a bit too sweet, but not so much to be cloying.

A 7-ounce filet mignon was cooked perfectly to medium rare and was steakhouse-tender and flavorful. The dish stood tall on its own without a sauce. Fireside Grill uses certified Angus beef, and the filet had a good beefy taste and but-



Special offerings of Fireside Grill include mini-desserts, left, of strawberry and blueberry shortcake, chocolate cheesecake and Key lime pie, and flatbread pizza, below, with wild mushrooms, sun-dried tomato pesto and fontina cheese. At bottom, the dining room and open kitchen.



tery consistency.

A free-range chicken breast really tasted like chicken. It had been marinated in herbs, olive oil and garlic, and it was the star of a dish that also included beautifully sautéed baby spinach and more of those cheddar mashed potatoes.

Perhaps the best surprise at Fireside Grill was the quality of the shrimp rigatoni dish. The shrimp were briny fresh, the pasta was cooked just al dente and the gentle tomato sauce had big chunks of fresh tomatoes that were sweet and light.

Another popular entree is Chilean sea bass, Brazilian-style, with vine-ripe tomatoes, red onion, russet potatoes, cilantro and wine.

All of the entrees were ample without being massive. On the other hand, desserts were petite, on purpose. Fireside serves a selection of mini-desserts, three-bite wonders that are a perfect end to a rea-

sonably sized meal. Choose from Key lime pie, a fruit tart, crème brûlée, chocolate cheesecake and the most decadent cherries with chocolate. And enjoy, each is only about 150 to 200 calories.

Fireside Grill, 9000 Lorton Station Blvd. (off Lorton Road), Lorton, 703-372-1923. Hours: 3 to 10 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 11 a.m. to midnight Friday and Saturday, and 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday. Appetizers, \$4.95 to \$8.95; main courses, \$9.95 to \$23.95; Sunday brunch for adults, \$17.95, and for ages 4-10, \$8.95. Accessible to people with disabilities. www.firesidegrillva.com.

If you have a favorite restaurant that you think deserves attention, please contact Nancy Lewis at lewisn@washpost.com.