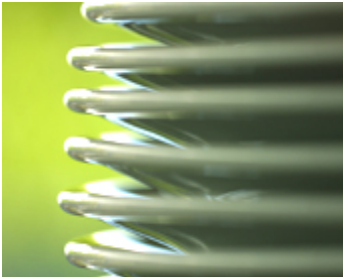


Sam Snead's

American
Eclectic



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CRITIC REVIEW ★★☆☆☆

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First, a confession: I don't get golf.

I can't understand the fascination of a game that involves hitting a small white orb (in my book, that's called baseball) and that requires covering vast distances of green space (in my book, that's called taking a walk in the park).

So, why do I like Sam Snead's Tavern in Port St. Lucie? Maybe because the golf theming is kept tastefully in check at this nearly year-old establishment, part of a growing chain. If you're looking for the Hard Rock Cafe of golf, you've come to the wrong place.

But maybe it's because the restaurant is just what this growing suburban city needs: A place that knows how to turn out a decent oak-grilled steak, plus some other solid fare, at a decent price. Sam Snead's reminds me more of comfortable urban bistros such as Houston's or J. Alexander's than it does a themed restaurant.

The look is cozy, comfortable and just a tad sophisticated -- you might forget the restaurant is inside a fairly generic Hilton Garden Inn. But it's really the scent of the oak grill that draws you into the place: You know they're cooking, literally.

Still, we wanted to bide our time before we bit into one of those oak-grilled specialties. We did so with a fine Napa Valley cabernet -- from Aquinas -- priced reasonably at \$30 a bottle (we love that the restaurant's wine list emphasizes bottles regular folks can afford).

We also enjoyed two starters. An iceberg wedge salad (\$6) did just what such a salad is supposed to do -- play up the contrast between the cool, crisp and fairly tasteless lettuce and the creamy, full-flavored dressing (in this case, a Southwest ranch that tasted as if it was prepared in house). The tuna sashimi (\$13.50 for a half order) wouldn't give any local Japanese restaurants cause for concern -- the fish was tasty enough, but the offering was priced higher than what I've had in sushi eateries.

Conversely, the steak -- in our case, a 16-ounce ribeye (\$26) -- came off as a remarkable value. Not only was the Angus beef more than amply juicy and tender, the flavor of the oak grill permeated the meat. I've had plenty of \$40-plus steaks from serious steakhouses that were no match for this.

The rest of the entrees were hit and slightly miss. A rib basket (\$14, available at lunch only) came with a decent portion of baby-backs, but they didn't have that slow-cooked porky goodness I'd expect from a 'cue joint. Similarly, a grouper sandwich (\$16) -- the restaurant prides itself on offering local fish -- was not as tasty as what I'd get in a real seafood restaurant. But I did like the spicy shrimp flat bread (\$12), a contemporary take on pizza that also works well as a shareable appetizer.

I also liked the restaurant's signature dessert, an oddball creation called the Chocolate Sack (\$9). It's just that: chocolate that's been molded in the shape of a paper bag, filled with white chocolate mousse, raspberry purée and sponge cake and then divvied tableside by your server. It might benefit from a better grade of chocolate, but it's such a great concept, I'm not going to carp much. (Why can't all local restaurants see the need for such a signature sweet, instead of offering another take on Key lime pie or chocolate lava cake?)

Service is just what you expect in this kind of establishment -- not too formal, not too casual. Granted, I went during a slow time, but my sense is this is a restaurant willing to do right by its patrons.

And that includes the non-golfers among us.