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Style Publishing Group
P.O. Box 1676
Frisco, Texas 75034
Phone: 972.335.1181
Toll Free: 877.781.7067
Fax: 214.722.2313

E-mail: info@friscostyle.com
Web: www.friscostyle.com

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Jasper's Flat Iron Steak

photo by Leah Ratliff

Jasper's: A Gourmet Backyard Cookout

By Lee Ratliff

IMAGINE ATTENDING A BACKYARD COOKOUT. Have you snapped that mental image? Good. Now, delete your neighbor standing over the grill with a Bud-Lite wearing, cut-offs, and a “Kiss the Cook” T-shirt. Replace him with a team of world-class chefs. Swap out the back patio with an upscale contemporary dining room. Imagine sharply dressed and attentive wait-staff rather than packs of rowdy children. Delete the mosquitoes. And instead of ribs, burgers, potato salad and other backyard dishes, you’re eating...well, you’re eating ribs, burgers, potato salad, and other backyard dishes. Oh, but they’re really, really good backyard dishes and every one has a creative gourmet twist. Now you’re thinking of Jasper’s.

Located in the Shops at Legacy, Jasper’s is backyard cuisine revisited. All of the standard cookout dishes are served, but they’ve been disassembled and reconstructed with a chef’s sensibility

for an upscale dining experience. For example, the beef in your basic burger is elevated to Wagyu Kobe Beef, a product of Japanese cattle that are reportedly fed beer and massaged daily to produce the most tender and succulent beef in the world.

Jasper’s is the brainchild of Chef Kent Rathbun. Chef Rathbun earned his chops in the kitchens of The Mansion on Turtle Creek and the Landmark Restaurant in the Dallas Melrose Hotel before he struck out on his own in the late nineties by opening his first restaurant, Abacus, in Uptown Dallas. But even as Abacus was rising to the top of Dallas restaurants, Chef Rathbun was beginning to develop the Jasper’s concept. He spent two years visiting the top restaurants in California, New York, Paris and Italy to get ideas for the kitchen and he brought on the Abacus design team to render his vision of a contemporary, upscale dining room with elements of the back patio brought

indoors.

Jasper’s opened in June, 2003 to immediate local and even national acclaim.

A first-time visitor to Jasper’s could be forgiven for not catching the oxymoronic “gourmet backyard” concept at first glance. Jasper’s is much more “gourmet” than “backyard.” The restaurant’s interior is very tastefully decorated in a contemporary theme, but one might not immediately notice that much of the décor and many of the sculptures are abstracted representations of outdoor elements such as waving grass, reeds, creek beds and the like. Even the chairs are made of teak like you might find on a patio.

Nor would most of the menu items be out of place in any fine restaurant. Yes, some items are clearly jazzed up comfort food, but most items, like the Pan-Seared Salmon with Mascarpone Polenta and Jumbo Asparagus, would be equally at



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Jasper's Crab Cakes
photo by Leah Ratliff

Crab Cakes

These crab cakes, from *Food & Wine Special Selection Fish*, are delicate, rich and flavorful.

1 pound fresh lump crabmeat
1 egg
1/4 c red bell pepper, seeded & minced
1/2 c scallion, minced
1/4 c mayonnaise
1 Tbls Dijon mustard
salt & freshly ground black pepper to taste
2 Tbls unseasoned bread crumbs
1 c flour for dredging
1 tsp curry powder
2 Tbls peanut or vegetable oil
2 Tbls butter
Lemon wedges

Mix together crabmeat, egg, bell pepper, scallions, mayonnaise, mustard, salt, and pepper. Add enough bread crumbs to bind the mixture just enough to form into cakes; start with 2 tablespoons and use more as needed. Refrigerate the mixture until ready to cook. Season the flour with salt, pepper and curry powder. Preheat a 12-inch skillet over medium-high heat. Add the oil and butter and heat until the butter foam subsides. Shape the crabmeat mixture into four cakes, dredge each in the flour, and cook, adjusting the heat as necessary and turning once (very gently), until golden brown on both sides. Total cooking time will be about 10 minutes. Serve with lemon wedges.



Jasper's Mini Trio Dessert
photo by Leah Ratliff

relatively low prices. All of the Minis are \$5 and just the right size for someone who has just finished a big meal. They are designed as a sweet ending to a filling meal, not a filling meal in themselves. If you want to try several desserts and share them among the table, the Mini Trio (\$12) is your choice of any three desserts on the same plate.

Our Mini Trio started with Rocky Road Ice Cream Sandwich - vanilla ice cream with chocolate sauce, caramel sauce, and marshmallow fluff sandwiched between two chocolate nut cookies. Rick's Rockin' Chocolate Cake was a dense layered cake with an intense chocolate taste, similar to a brownie. It was accompanied by a tiny, but delicious vanilla malt. Finally – at our waitress's suggestion – we ordered the Cherry Limeade Pie when our first choice proved unavailable. Unexpectedly, this turned out to be the hands-down favorite. The sweet/tart layers of lime and cherry custard surrounded by a graham cracker macadamia nut crust made the dessert the perfect foil for the heavy meal.

The Stone Fruit Buckle with vanilla ice cream sounded so enticing, we ordered a serving along with our Trio. On our visit, the fruit was cranberry – not a stone fruit, but a more timely seasonal fruit for November. (Note to Jasper's: Time to update the menu?) Like the Cherry Limeade Pie, the buckle had just the right ratio of sweetness and tartness to complement the meal.

Only in recent years has Collin County attracted the top tier of fine dining establishments. At the epicenter of this northern phenomenon, Jasper's continues to hold its own – not only among its suburban peers, but among the best restaurants the DFW region has to offer.

Lee Ratliff is our expert "foodie" and owner of Ambrosia Creamery.

home on the Abacus menu.

Speaking of the food, a good place to start is with Jasper's signature appetizer, the Maytag Blue Cheese Potato Chips (\$9). Though not unique to Jasper's, they seem to have almost perfected the dish. The handmade potato chips are sprinkled with crumbled blue cheese and the taste and texture combination make for a great dish. The chips are intended to be served hot, but cooled too rapidly, so unfortunately they were less than warm on our recent visit.

The Jumbo Lump Crab Cakes (\$14) have an excellent crab flavor and a very thin layer of cornmeal breading. The crab cakes are very lightly seasoned, allowing the delicate crab flavor to come through. A tomatillo serrano sauce accompanies the dish to spice it up a little.

Chef Rathbun hails from Kansas City, so it should be no surprise that beef plays an important role on the menu. The Flat Iron Steak (\$26) was cooked perfectly medium-rare and was quite tender. The flavor was good, but unremarkable which is surprising for a cut that is known for having a "beefy" flavor akin to a sirloin. The accompanying side – sautéed spinach and mushrooms – was good, but the portion was small relative to the steak. Order an extra side dish if you want more than a few bites. I got the Jasper's

Greens Salad (\$6 with an entrée) and it turned out to be the highlight of my meal. The menu describes it as field greens with candied pecans, blue cheese and roasted shallot vinaigrette. (Stop... you had me at "candied pecans"). It was very well-balanced with the tart dressing, earthy blue cheese, sweet and crunchy pecans and fresh flavorful greens.

The Rotisserie Roasted Prime Rib (\$31) was a slab of meat almost an inch thick. It came with a delicious, loaded baked potato drizzled with some kind of scallion puree. The Texas Peach Barbecued Pork Tenderloin (\$23) was served with bourbon creamed corn and twice-baked potato. Follow the chef's recommendation and order it medium-rare. The pork industry has eradicated the health concerns that once required pork to be cooked to a leathery well done.

Chef Rathbun has spent time in Thailand and that influence reveals itself in the Red Chili Seared Tuna Salad (\$16). Consisting of large slices of sashimi-grade tuna, sprinkled with chili and sesame seeds and very lightly seared; on Asian-style cold rice noodles with julienned vegetables and topped with a spicy Thai vinaigrette - this is not your mother's tuna salad.

I really like Jasper's dessert philosophy – they serve small portions ("Minis") at