

The Times January 20, 2005

Saddle Creek Woodfired Grill Restaurant does new take on steak

By Marcus Howard
Staff Writer

The new Saddle Creek Woodfired Grill restaurant, which opened last month in Lakewood Village, is a steak-house that really isn't just a steakhouse.

Saddle Creek is run by Colton's Restaurant Group, which operates steakhouses that are more "cowboy-style and country western music," vice president of operations James Kendall said, billing the new venture as a much more upscale version. It's partly the emphasis on variety that distinguishes Saddle Creek from the rest, he added.

"The response has continued to be very positive and we continue to see a nice crowd every night," he said, adding that seating in the restaurant is "on a wait" every evening. "And we have seen so many return customers, not just once or twice, but several times a week."

Colton's, which originated in Conway, maintains operations in Tennessee, Mississippi, Missouri, Iowa and other locales in Arkansas.

Though Saddle Creek is the first of its kind and wasn't opened as a chain, Kendall said there are plans for expansion down the road. It opened in the space once occupied by Mexico Chiquito, which closed in October 2003, and after an extensive renovation only the original structural skeleton and roof remain.

As for why North Little Rock was chosen as the start-up point, Kendall said that his partners at Colton's are based here and the restaurant would present an opportunity to create an eatery with "a new concept."

"We didn't want to hit people in the pocketbook, but still offer everything from scratch," he said.

The menu features moderately priced offerings, the most expensive of which is a pan-seared Chilean sea bass, which goes for \$18.95 and has gotten "rave reviews," Kendall said.

Other customer favorites, he said, include the various steaks, the oven-roasted pork chop and salad offerings.

Executive Chef Kenneth Weis said the menu was devised to offer “traditional American fare in the comfort food genre.” But the menu is much more expansive than one would expect at a standard steakhouse, so large in fact that Weis himself had to refer to it. There is an emphasis on pastas, sandwiches, appetizers and sides, he said adding that special note should be given to the fact that all of Saddle Creek’s steaks are hand-cut.

“Everything on this menu is made from scratch,” Weis said.

The restaurant’s pizza offerings are cooked in a wood-burning oven and the steaks are done on a grill over hickory and oak, he noted. And with its extensive wine and martini offerings, not to mention a dessert repertoire that includes French-style cheesecake and creme brulee, Saddle Creek clearly goes well beyond just steaks.

Weis, originally from New York, recently relocated to North Little Rock after spending the last eight years as executive chef at various restaurants in Dallas, including work as a concept chef at the similarly upscale steakhouse Mignon. Once in town, he had three days in which to craft the menu for Saddle Creek.

The restaurant was modeled after a Montana lounge, with a warm atmosphere set by its brownstone look, fireplaces and lighting that gives the impression that the whole place is candle-lit. Near one end of the bar, which Kendall said has quickly become a popular gathering point, is a display kitchen that “brings food preparation into the dining experience.” The flames from the wood-fired oven are in plain view and diners nearby can watch kitchen creations come together from start to finish, he said.

There are also banquet facilities and a private dining area, which are available for business meetings and other functions, he said.

Saddle Creek Woodfired Grill’s hours of operation are 4 to 10 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 4 to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday.