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George Martin's Grillfire

A wealth of restaurant experience went into conceiving Grillfire.

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Two heads are better than one, especially when they belong to two exceptional professionals opening a new restaurant. That happened in Syosset a couple of months ago when George Korten of the George Martin Restaurant Group and Richard Cutler of Mim's Hospitality put their heads together to open Grillfire, a sophisticated American Grill where Mim's had been.

Together Korten and Cutler operate 12 restaurants on Long Island that stretch from Merrick and Rockville Centre in Nassau to Great River in Suffolk. The new Grillfire in Syosset is the third on the Island and it's a winner.

This unpretentious restaurant doesn't take itself too seriously. Tasty warm pretzels with a honey mustard dip arrive instead of bread shortly after patrons are seated and diners receive complimentary cotton candy at the meal's end. Small towels serve as napkins and the restaurant doesn't take reservations, although they do maintain a list of people who have called ahead. Stone and brick walls, wood columns, a bar with a tin ceiling plus an electrical linear fireplace in a stone wall seemed to be hip enough for the young crowd and conventional enough for more mature folks. Both were present in large numbers when I visited.

But the esthetics, appropriate as they are, aren't the reason Grillfire took off from the get go. Even on weeknights there is sometimes a wait for tables at this bustling spot. That's because executive chef Frank Greco is churning out an all-American array of sometimes innovative, sometimes traditional, always solid dishes. Portions here are mammoth and prices are moderate. Service is sweet, swift and concerned.

But don't expect serenity—this hard-surfaced place rocks. In fact, the din made it difficult to hear what our personable but soft-spoken waitress was saying.

Yet aside from hard apples in the apple Betty (\$7) dessert, every dish scored. The Tuscan chicken (\$19) was less than exciting while the half rack of soft, smooth-textured baby back ribs with a side of creamy mashed potatoes (\$17) were perfectly inviting, as were crunchy coconut shrimp and chips (\$21). A hefty, luscious black jack burger stacked with candied bacon, pepper jack cheese and cherry peppers (\$15) made Big Macs seem like pipsqueaks. A big bowl of slightly spicy southwest chicken and vegetable soup (\$7) was dense with corn and beans. But don't overlook tender fish tacos with crunchy cabbage (\$12) or the zucchini linguini loaded with baby shrimp (\$11).

The hands down dessert winner is the homey, satisfying, warm housemade brownie sundae (\$8).