

Dressler's feeds on warmth

The setting, comfort and steaks are superb, but some essential details are lacking – especially given the upscale prices.

BY HELEN SCHWAB
Restaurant Writer

The highs can be high at Dressler's:

Slicing into a perfectly juicy heart of ribeye, a center cut from that traditional steak, tweaked with a bit of blackening spices.

Ordering a glass of wine, and listening to your server casually mention its precise Wine Spectator rating.

Gazing out, beyond a gorgeous light fixture, at uptown Charlotte on a clear evening, beautifully framed in the dining room's enormous windows.

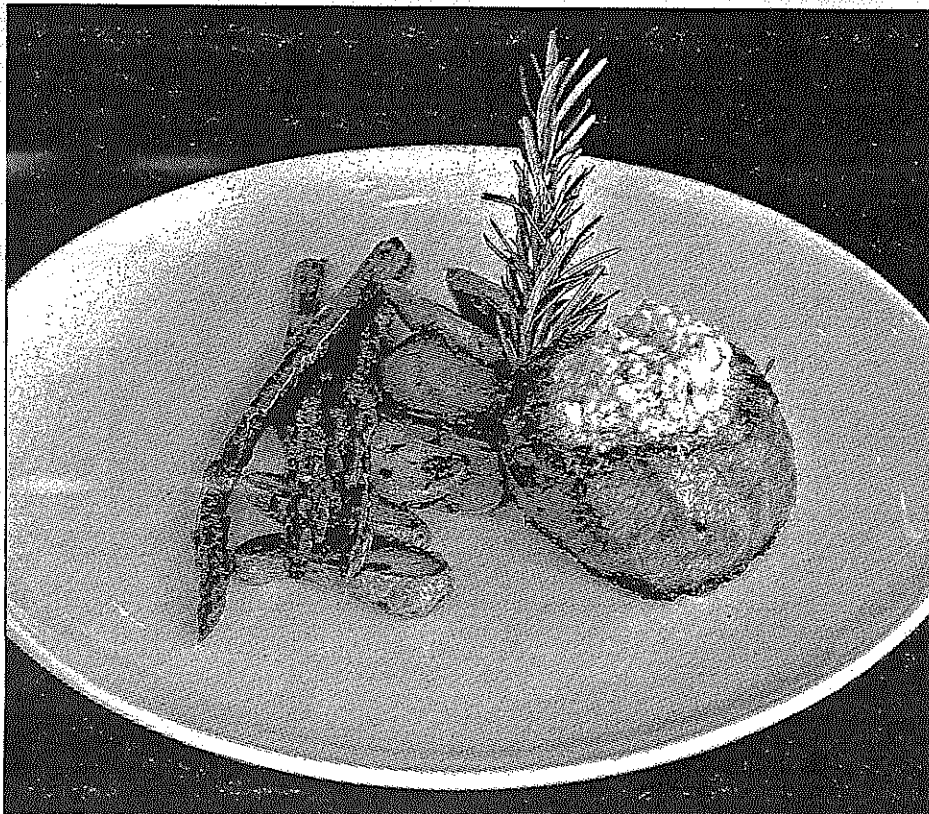
The restaurant is a second outpost of a Birkdale Village original owned by Jon and Kim Dressler, both of whom worked at steakhouse giant Morton's before opening their own place. They opened this nearly a year ago and, says Jon, have "rekindled a lot of old friendships" from those Morton's days – and "most everyone still looks great."

And the Dresslers keep a keen eye on relationships. Family – from parents to siblings – pitch in doing all sorts of things, and Jon's mom is "a mini-celebrity in her own right," since half the dessert menu comes from her recipes.

He says he works to extend that family feeling to employees and is proud of both a low turnover rate and customer comments on the personal touch. Remembering customers' names – and drink orders – is highly valued.

Steaks are the strong suit, in my experience. The heart of ribeye is terrific, seasoned with restraint (overdoing blackening is such a sin) and sided plainly, with asparagus and sliced fingerlings. I do wish the asparagus spears' tough ends had been snapped off higher, but the flavors were fine. Filet, flat iron and New York strips are also offered, and there's a short rib, too.

Seafood varied more. The much-recommended "Just for the Halibut" entrée, a layered affair of crab, roasted red pepper, spinach and sun-dried tomato beurre blanc along with the fish, fell short because the too-thick, too-bland, too-dry chive-potato cake so dominated the plate. But a horseradish-encrusted salmon was



STEPHEN YOUNG

The blackened heart of ribeye at Dressler's is served with fingerling potatoes, asparagus and herb blue cheese butter.

teed spinach and rich roasted mushrooms.

The seared tuna appetizer is a winner in flavor though difficult to eat with its long strings of cucumber, while the Low-country crab dip should be skipped by crab purists: The meat loses all but its texture in a wealth of parmesan and jack cheeses.

A lower low, considering prices: One night, a linen-topped basket contained hardened-on-one-side, cold slices of flavorless plain bread. Another night, it wasn't hard on one side. A detail, but I'd rather have no bread – and can support places that have stopped serving it – than a haphazard effort.

Other first-plate choices include onion soup, pan-seared scallops with shallot-balsamic jam and a Thai calamari appetizer – tentacle-free for you squeamish sorts. Entrees range from classics such as the rack of lamb and grilled pork chop to almond-encrusted trout and shellfish and grits with Cajun beurre blanc.

Though there is chocolate cake, crème

DRESSLER'S

■ from 16H

style cheesecake that is impossibly light and creamy, a carrot cake and an apple cake that was described to us as a cross between pie and cake. This is a pretty good way to convey the blend of cooked apple and cake in bundt form, though the ice cream and sauce make it more lush than you'd expect.

Dressler's sweeping views and vivid details – a wood-paneled wall with cutouts for wine display, vibrant colored artwork, stretches of deep burgundy wall – create a handsome, comfortable place in which to be cared for.