

Merrilea J. Mayo, with contributions from Altaf "Tof" Carim, presents a review of the Berkshire Grill, which is a restaurant located within an easy walk of the Hynes Convention Center, site of the Materials Research Society Fall Meetings in Boston.

If you are a Hynes convention cowboy, spending long hours in the stationary saddle, it is mighty tempting to mosey down the street just a few yards away to the Berkshire Grill, plop down in a booth, and have someone else wrastle up a few of those ornery buffalo chicken tenders. As inevitably as the second law of thermodynamics, the Berkshire Grill targets its ambiance to the weary convention-goer: exposed brick walls, wooden booths with dim hanging lights, and skewed perspective paintings on the wall in aqua blue and plum red. Patio seating is also available. Found here are steaks, Asian food that is not all that Asian, and other chain comfort foods.

But if there were truth in advertising, the Berkshire Grill should be renamed the "Just OK' Corral." The best dishes are those that require little or no preparation by the staff and come right out of the institutional food supply van or perhaps traverse a glancing angle over the stove. The gyoza appetizers are the same 0.5-mm-skinned beauties that you get at TGI Friday's and were therefore a highlight (sometimes institutional food is actually good!). The calamari and potato skins are also absolutely standard out-of-the-frozen-food-bag that you will recognize from a dozen chain restaurants or Sam's Club. Steaks are steaks and are generally prepared well. For my money, I would rather have my steak prepared over a backyard grill, complete with a tantalizing aroma of volatilized hydrocarbons that wafts for blocks on a crisp fall day and makes me the envy of all my neighbors. Yet the Berkshire Grill's medium-rare filet has that Fe-nuanced tang of real red meat that cannot be denied its place high on the flesh-to-cardboard steak scale. The tenderloin cooked medium was a notch below. The romaine lettuce in the accompanying Caesar salad was wow! fresh, with an exceptional energy release rate on fracture. The salad did not have the anchovies associated with real Caesar salads—not that I eat them, you know, but you kind of feel you are entitled, just the same.

Now for the odd and not entirely pleasant surprises. First were the delicious-looking warm rolls, brushed with glistening molten butter and parsley, hand-served with obvious pride and silver-toned tongs. Just as I was taking the first bite, I noticed something familiar and odd. The smell. Musty. Very musty. Where had I encountered that smell before? Then, the sudden



Berkshire Grill

111 Huntington Ave.

Boston, MA 02199

617-266-8194

Take-out available

Mon.–Thurs., 11:00 a.m.–midnight

Fri.–Sat., 11:00 a.m.–1:00 a.m.

Sun., 11:30 a.m.–midnight

realization: It was the exact smell of my refrigerator at home, when too many things have been in there too long. And so, one assumes the dough for the rolls suffered a comparable entropic decay before being cooked up to serve to us at the Berkshire Grill. After the one experimental bite, I passed on the rolls and asked for the MSDS sheet—you know, just to make sure. Another mysterious starch preparation was the garlic potatoes that came with the steaks. No butter. No salt. No flavor. And absolutely no garlic! The last convention crowd to come through here must have been the Vampire Coalition.

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Then there were the shrimp stuffed with crab and scallops. The shrimp came out entombed in a deep and crumbly grave of breading. Excavation of the oily composite led to no discoveries of other life forms, particularly no crab or scallops. Just bread. Spooky. The breading

was in fact quite tasty, but only if you were prepared for a dinner of bread stuffing at the cost of scallops and crab. We were not. Pressing onward, there was the lobster ravioli, a house specialty. The lobsters must have run off with the crab and scallops, cleverly managing to avoid being trapped in the ravioli. My suspicion is that neither atomic-resolution electron microscopy nor sensitive surface-chemistry analyses would have revealed any trace of lobster. Perhaps—aha—the "lobster" ravioli were actually cheese ravioli in disguise! Or maybe they were passed briefly over some vapors containing a partial pressure of lobster aroma, much as a dry martini is a glass of gin waved over an open bottle of vermouth. It could be a new fad in cooking: culinary vapor therapy for tepid foods, complete with a new line of aromaware. Unfortunately, in this case, the partial pressure of lobster was measurable in single-digit Torr and not measurable on the palate.

Dessert at the Berkshire Grill epitomized the truism that a few kilograms of fat and sugar will make anything taste good. Thus, the liquid-chocolate truffle was dense and bittersweet as advertised, with a warm raspberry and chocolate sauce. The less-sinful sopaipillas with chocolate and strawberry sauce were OK, as befits the "Just OK' Corral," and on a par with those at, say, Chi-Chi's. They were not the same as the voluminously airy, crispy pillows that have made sopaipillas an art form in New Mexico, but New Mexico has always had a cuisine apart. And, going down the sugar-and-fat scale, there was the apple crisp. Now, there are two things necessary to make an apple crisp an apple crisp: apples and crispiness. There were a couple of visible apples, but they were not in an apple crisp. Staring at the sodden object in front of him, my bewildered companion asked, "Is this the apple sog?" Sure enough, the apples were a minor feature in lots of heavy, wet breading.

The moral of the story is—if you are looking for reliable chain food where all the ingredients come prepackaged into the food, you will do OK at the Berkshire Grill. If you are looking for fresh food that requires the ingredients to be inserted or prepared by the on-site kitchen, you will leave without lobster, crab, scallops, butter, salt, garlic, or crisp, though you might pick up some vampires and a free set of aromaware. □