



2001 RESTAURANT OF THE YEAR

IN ITS PRESENTATION, TASTE, SERVICE AND SIMPLE GOODNESS, **THE HILL** EASILY CLIMBS TO THE HEIGHTS

Surprise. Not only is Hour Detroit's choice for 2001 Restaurant of the Year one of the newest members of metro Detroit's culinary clan but, judging by the reaction of virtually all of those with whom we first shared the news, it's mostly unheard of outside the east-side region that is its home.

If you don't live near Grosse Pointe Farms, you should make the trip — but call ahead. And, unless we're losing our touch, you'll be back.

The Hill Seafood & Chop House is that good.

Pretty straightforward name, no? It's that kind of place. Sounds just a tad retro, eh? Absolutely, if retro takes you back to a day when restaurant meals were amply portioned, but not grotesquely so; when everything on the plate was recognizable, without splashes of this and squiggles of that to distract from the expert preparation and simple goodness of it all. If it means that crystal sings and, like all the tableware, shines from careful tending. If it means that not only do the servers know enough to keep their thumbs out of your water glass, they also let the customer believe he or she is always right, true or not. If it means a fine meal begins with good, warm bread and ends as perfectly as it begins. If it means the owners are in the house and keeping a true proprietary eye on it all. Then The Hill is retro.

Don't underestimate the importance of that last point. Almost invariably, the best restaurants, those that succeed most thoroughly in doing what they set out to do, have ever-present, watchful owners. There's plenty of evidence: The Alan family, at Mason-Girardot Alan Manor in Windsor. Steve Allen and Rocky Rachwitz, at Steve & Rocky's in Novi. The Bradys, at Diamond Jim Brady's in Novi. Lino Catroppa, at The Cook's Shop in Windsor. The Chins, at Mon Jin Lau in Troy. Craig Common, at the Common Grill in Chelsea. Rick Halberg, at Emily's in Northville. Steve Kalil, at Steve's Backroom in Harper Woods. Jim Kokas and Ed Mandziara, at Opus One in downtown Detroit. Jim and Mary Lark, at The Lark in West Bloomfield. The Nguyens, at Annam in Dearborn. Brian Polcyn, at Five Lakes Grill in Milford. The Seavitts, at Vintage Bistro in Grosse Pointe Farms. The Tonons, at Café Cortina in Farmington Hills. The Villegases, at Restaurant Villegas in Okemos. There are others.

Day in and day out, they're on site, keeping an eyeball on their baby, front and back. And now they're joined in a big way by The Hill's proprietors and "hands on" operators, David M. Pandy and Michael Connery, manager and chef, respectively. Before opening their restaurant in August, both worked their trades at the Bloomfield Hills Country Club.

BY RIC BOHY | PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOE VAUGHN



But they're from the neighborhood, another fact that shouldn't be underestimated. The Pointes are tricky turf for restaurateurs, and no further proof is needed than the history of the very site occupied by this marvelous new eatery. Do you remember Jimmy's, which earlier was Chianti? And before that Onez, and before that several others? They all ran aground on the shoal of Pointe-ish idiosyncrasies. One is that this is a conservative bunch who get uncomfortable outside the tried-and-true, the status quo, the *familiar*. Another is that private clubs hold sway and get the dining dollar, with restaurants left sucking wind.

You couldn't prove the latter by what's happening at The Hill. During each of several visits, including a Tuesday night, we found the place packed, lively and happy. All age groups seemed to be well represented. The joint was fairly jumping, in contrast to such clubby cues as dark wood, hunter-green paint, hunt-themed art prints, book-lined shelves and — that unmistakable echo of Old Detroit — Pewabic tile.

a thing. Husky, briny Sheffields are prepared in the old New Orleans way, baked on a bed of hot rock salt with a blanket of breading and fresh spinach, still just-crunchy. (These oysters are farmed in Connecticut and purified with ultraviolet light as a fail-safe measure. They're particularly tasty and worth seeking out.) Better yet are the same Sheffields served raw and, as promised, icy cold with sharp cocktail sauce. There are sweet crab cakes riddled with chunks of coral-and-white Jonah leg meat. There's calamari, too, lightly fried and still tender. And robust, dark French onion soup served as tradition dictates, baked in a crock. Fans of the dish will find this an exemplar, and hard to resist, but it would be a shame to miss what has already earned some word-of-mouth acclaim — housemade cream of tomato soup so rich that it might as well be a Bolognese sauce. (One of our guests instantly declared it her favorite soup, ever.)

Scan down to the biggest section of the menu, more than a dozen fish or seafood dishes, with a

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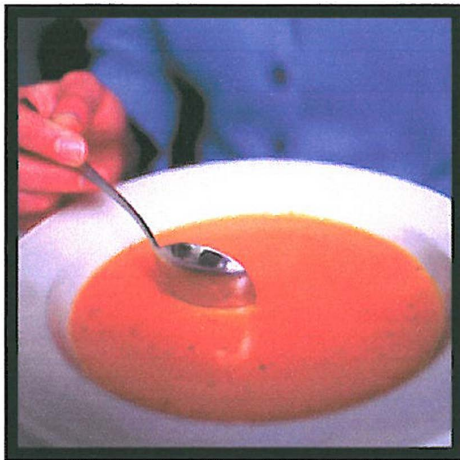
The scene looked a bit like Joe Muer's. It sounded like Sparky Herbert's. And it seemed to be doing a very sly job of filling the vacancies left by both.

A dead giveaway that such canny efforts are afoot arrives first at the table — the chilled, tart-sweet white bean salad that whetted appetites at Muer's for many years. It's soon followed by a loaf of crusty, warm housemade bread, a simple, aromatic pleasure. It's nice to munch both while scanning the decorations on The Hill's big pasteboard menu.

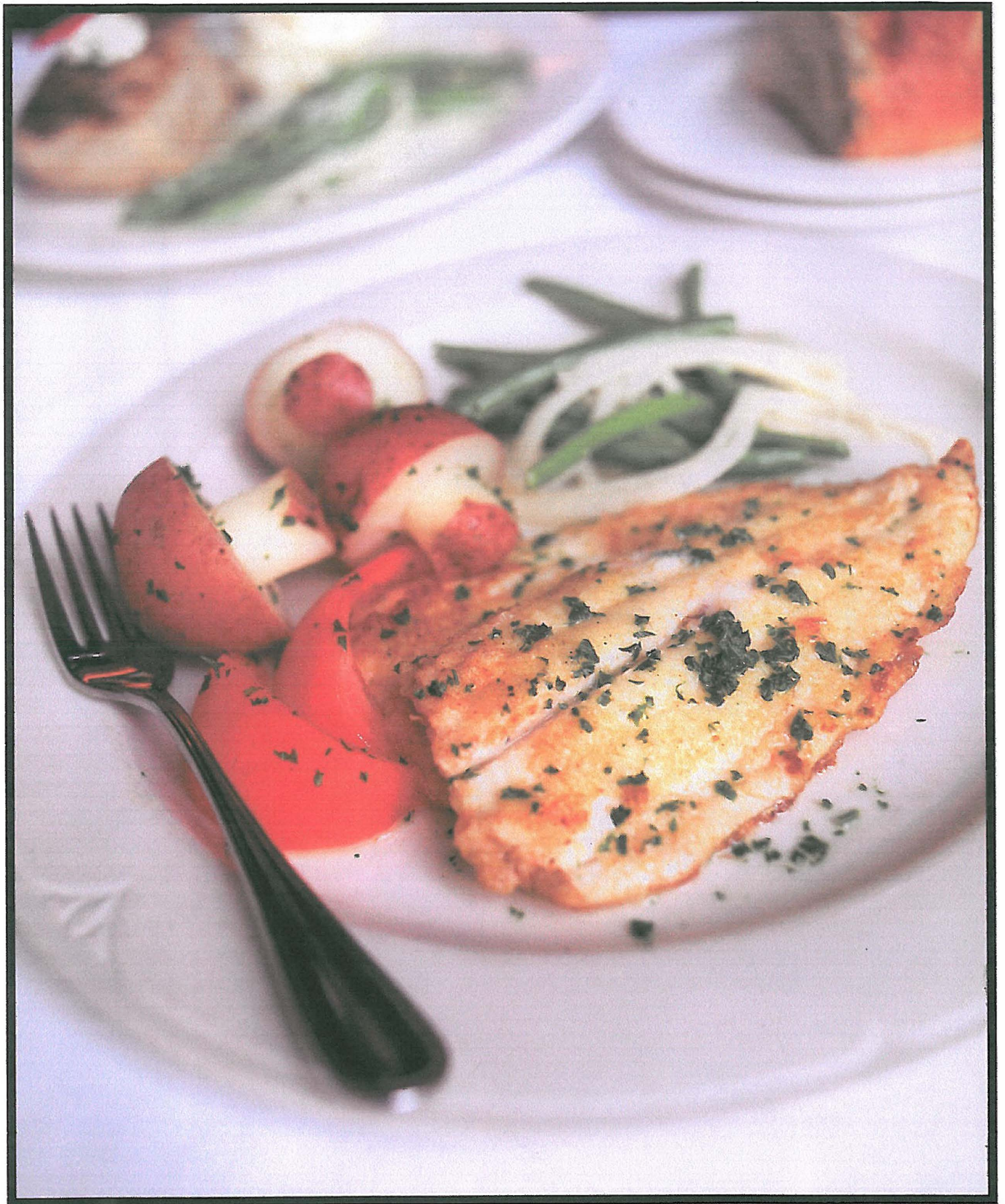
There's nothing fanciful here. That's not the point(e). An appetizer of oysters Rockefeller is anticutting edge, high-end comfort food, if there is such

couple of additional featured specials. The proprietors proudly point up that the ocean goods are flown in daily from the nearly revered Foley's Fish folks in Boston. Their product is so carefully and lovingly handled from harvest to service that we can remember only one other place with seafood that was so routinely excellent — and that was in a village on the Pacific coast of Mexico where the fish was brought directly to the restaurants by the men who caught it.

But it's not just the ocean fish — like rosy grilled Atlantic salmon that is especially good with the optional light sauce of white wine and capers, or



Opening page: Chicken Napoleon with Israeli couscous. Above left: Flavorful cream of tomato soup. Above right: The servers are peerless. Facing page: Proprietors David M. Pendy, left, and Michael Connery are east-side natives who know the turf.



yellowfin tuna crusted with pungent cracked black peppercorns and flamed at the table — that justifies the house pride. In an age when other restaurants foist on their frustrated clients pygmy-size lobster tails at grossly inflated “market prices,” The Hill evokes the good ol’ days once again with a specimen that packs much back. This South African lobster tail is plump and broiled perfectly, served with clarified butter and — when was the last time you saw this? — boiled redskins pared to resemble mushrooms. So, too, the brawny Alaskan king crab legs. Again — simple, delicious, reliant on the best available ingredients prepared without a lot of flimflam.

Dover sole, a truly ethereal and delicate fish, is done classically in simple meunière style — lightly sautéed with butter. Lake perch is done essentially the same way, but an alternative preparation is the “Hill of Perch,” about as fussy a dish as is offered here: The same sapid little perch flanks are stacked on crispy potato shreds, which are themselves piled

beans, their color locked in by blanching in salted water) and potato. We’re especially taken by Conner’s baked potato-and-onion “flan,” a tender, savory layered treat.

Another traditional hometown favorite is available for dessert — Sander’s Hot Fudge sundae. But the other three offerings make choosing very difficult: warm apple pie perfectly matched with cinnamon-swirl ice cream; mini chocolate cake, baked in a ramekin and mated with refreshing peppermint-stick ice cream; and a perfectly crunch-crustured *crème brûlée* topped with equally perfect fresh raspberries and a snowfall of powdered sugar. (We heard a gent utter the word “Heavenly!” at the table behind us one evening; he’d just tasted the *crème brûlée*.)

It’s all brought to the table with comfortable aplomb by a flawlessly performing waitstaff, a particular rarity in a time when it’s not uncommon for new restaurants to delay opening simply because they can’t find good help. One of our servers was smooth

DOVER SOLE, A TRULY ETHEREAL AND DELICATE FISH, IS DONE CLASSICALLY IN A SIMPLE MEUNIÈRE STYLE — LIGHTLY SAUTÉED WITH BUTTER.

on a bed of mashed potatoes. Another light sauce, lemon-caper, finishes this dish.

This is a chophouse, too, and The Hill is as praiseworthy for its meat as for the fish. Of particular note is the rib chop, a 20-ouncer that arrives — like all the meat — with butter sauce laced with smoky-sweet bourbon; and a Provimi veal chop that’s half the weight but equal in flavor and carnivorous appeal.

A word is due, here, on the sides. Nothing here is à la carte. Whether you choose fish or meat, your meal is rounded out with soup or salad, veggie of the day (you know even the side dishes are prepared with care when you see bright green string

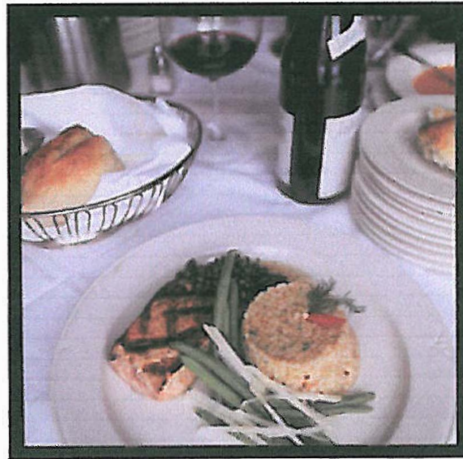
enough to say, without missing a beat, “And how would you like it prepared?” when we pointed out a blue-and-yellow specimen in the dining room’s tropical fish tank and joked that it would be “good eatin.”

It was a good-humored response that, though meant in jest, signaled that this is a place, and these are people, who aim to please. A place that’s comfortable, reliable, familiar.

Welcome to the club.

123 Kercheval, Grosse Pointe Farms, 313-886-8101. L & D Mon.-Fri., D Sat. Average entrée price, \$21.

Bohy is HOUR Detroit’s editor and chief food and restaurant critic. E-mail: rbohy@hourdetroit.com.



Facing page: A house signature, exquisite Dover sole meunière with redskin potatoes. Above left: A shining service set waiting for pickup. Above right: A featured special — seared salmon with caramelized capers. The warm, crusty bread is made in-house.