

## GLOBE NORTH DINING OUT

### **Sam's reprises a winning recipe**

When Michael and Amy Palmer opened Sam's Bistro in Reading four months ago, Michael said, their intention was to introduce a high-end steak house to the area. Several menu revisions later, they are reverting to their tried-and-true formula for success: a near mirror image of the menu offered at their original restaurant, Stearns & Hill's Bistro in Melrose.

107 Main St. (Route 28), Reading

781-944-7267; [www.samsbistro.com](http://www.samsbistro.com)

Hours: Sunday through Wednesday, 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m.; Thursday through Saturday, 11:30 a.m. to 11 p.m.

Major credit cards accepted

Reservations

Accessible to the handicapped

"We were trying to do something different, but it turns out people were coming to Sam's for more Stearns & Hill's," said Palmer, a Winchester resident who formerly owned the Tanner Tavern in Woburn, and the Swanton Street Diner and Pastazza, both in Winchester.

"Now," he added, "we're back to doing what we do best."

Palmer's vision of being "everything to everybody" seemed to have been realized when our three-person party visited on a recent Friday night, with adjoining tables occupied by several couples, a family with young children, and a group of eight enjoying a girls' night out.

Because Sam's Bistro opened on a mom-and-pop budget, Palmer explained that decorating efforts are ongoing in an effort to "make the house a home." The family bought its site, the former Wayside Bazaar party goods and toy store, in May 2009, and kept much of the building intact while converting it into a restaurant.

Even in its minimalist state, however, the newly remodeled interior has the comfortable feel of an old-fashioned family restaurant, with dark wood paneling and deep booths. Adjustments are being made to the lighting, he said, which was dim over the outer tables but so bright in general that we felt oddly on display until the dining room filled. Pictures are in the process of being added, he said, as well as rugs and drapery.

In terms of food, Sam's Bistro is hitting its mark as a casual, everyday restaurant that also offers high-end items such as a 16-ounce, bone-in veal chop (\$34), Australian rack of lamb (\$33), 8-ounce filet mignon (\$29), and pan-seared sea bass (\$28).

A New England-style raw bar features shrimp cocktail (\$13), oysters on the half-shell (\$13), and top neck clams (\$11), each with six pieces; half Maine lobster (\$17); tuna tartare (\$13); and a sampler (\$38).

New to the menu is lobster mac and cheese (\$13), and creative sandwich options include a salmon BLT (\$10), warm lobster (\$19), and muffaletta (\$10) with Italian meats, provolone, tomato-olive relish, and greens on a French baguette.

Unfortunately, Palmer said one of our table's favorite dishes won't survive the next menu alteration because of uneven demand: the tres tacos (\$9), three firm tortillas piled high with iceberg lettuce, pico de gallo, guacamole, sour cream, and roasted chicken (marinated sirloin steak or grilled shrimp could be substituted for \$1 extra). The calamari (\$9), a menu item with more staying power, was lightly fried and served with hot pepper rings and two dipping sauces, tartar and marinara.

The Nantucket pie (\$24) was a steaming casserole full of broiled haddock, shrimp, scallops, and lobster meat with a light crumb coating, accompanied by a side of rice that handily absorbed some of the flavorful juice.

The 16-ounce sirloin tips (\$17) were tender and seasoned in a house marinade of Worcestershire sauce, garlic, soy sauce, and spices. They were served with exceptionally creamy mashed potatoes and a standard mixed-vegetable medley of carrots and green and wax beans.

The turkey dinner (\$18) was quite literally a pile of sliced white meat breast, cornbread stuffing, the same homemade mashed potatoes, gravy, sweet corn, and cranberry jelly. The diner observed, without a hint of complaint, that he could only distinguish the corn and cranberry jelly because of their colors.

All of the after-dinner sweets are provided by Just Desserts of Wakefield. Our party can vouch for the blueberry cobbler (\$8), which was packed with wild blueberries, and the apple crisp (\$7), which was served hot as requested. The mile-high chocolate cake (\$8) lived up to its name, with four layers of moist cake separated by chocolate mousse and topped with a layer of ganache.

While the two restaurants keep them busy, Palmer quipped that he and his wife will be obligated to open a third. The bistro in Reading drew its name from the initials of their first three children — Sarah, Anthony, and Michael — but that was before the arrival of their fourth.

“Next,” he said, “we need to open a restaurant for Kathryn.”

*CINDY CANTRELL* ■