

Food: January 11, 2008

Restaurant Review

By Wes Marshall

III Forks

111 Lavaca at Cesar Chavez, 474-1776

Monday-Thursday: 5-10pm; Friday-Saturday: 5-11pm

www.iiiforks.com



III Forks sommelier, Danny Payne

Photo by John Anderson

III Forks is a steak house with a luxurious feel, thanks, in part, to lots of wood and leather. Everything in the restaurant, from the first greeting to the final goodbye, is aimed at making you feel coddled and comfortable. All this comes at a high price. Luckily, III Forks has a secret weapon for wine lovers that will take a little sting out of the final check.

Our first visit was on a Thursday night. We didn't have reservations, and it was a busy night, but they found us a table in the bar. The bar is wide open with high ceilings and just the perfect amount of sound control. There was a clubby buzz from the stylish and expensively dressed patrons, and the live jazz also upped the sound. Nonetheless, we could talk at normal levels.

Our server was prompt, efficient, and had the ideal juxtaposition of happy friendliness and speedy professionalism. The menu is very simple, just two pages. Steak is the thing, though they also have a nice selection of fish. We started by ordering the huge appetizer medley (\$15.95), which includes a shrimp cocktail with three crunchy, sweet jumbo shrimp, an enormous Crabcake St. Francis made almost solely from lump crabmeat and mayonnaise, and some huge, plump bacon-wrapped scallops.

The wine list is mammoth and, like all steak houses, very pricey. This is where III Forks' secret weapon comes into play. Their sommelier, Danny Payne, created a wine list with all sorts of fun surprises, and he is a great guide, quite understanding of financial limitations, encyclopedic in the details of each wine, and excited when he sees a happy customer. We were very happy when he steered us to a nicely aged 1999 Leasingham Bin 56 Cabernet (\$55) and a 2005 Luca Malbec (\$60), a huge, opaque, almost black wine.

For our main courses, we had a bone-in rib eye (\$41.95), a rack of lamb (\$35.95), and tenderloin medallions (\$32.95). Those prices seem high, but the quality of both the USDA Prime beef and

the lamb is spectacular. One nice touch is there are always servers waiting at the kitchen, so the second your order pops up, a person grabs your rocket-hot plate and rushes it to the table. Even more incredible is the deft dance both in the kitchen and out on the floor that allows them to serve everyone's entrée at precisely the same time.

Our steaks and lamb were flawlessly pink inside, and the portions were colossal, so big that most couples will probably do just fine splitting a steak. They charge an extra \$7 for splitting an entrée, and that's the biggest bargain in the house. Because unlike most steak houses that ding you for every extra, III Forks includes fresh creamed corn made table-side, mashed potatoes, vegetables, big slices of tomatoes, and spring onions.

Four of us went back a couple of weeks later on a crowded Friday night. We got the same professional, gracious service as before, but this time, we were seated in one of the fancy dining areas. This visit, sommelier Payne again showed us some bargains. He not only remembered my name, he remembered my tastes and price range. This time he picked a 2004 Storrs Petite Sirah (\$53), a fruity wine with nice acidity. Later, when we asked for another bottle, he surprised us with one of Texas' best wines, Fall Creek's 2003 Meritus (\$58).

We ordered three appetizers. The onion rings (\$9.95) start with a whole onion, cut into 1-inch-thick rings, then fried to crunchy perfection and architecturally piled into a pyramid shape. III Forks' wedge salad (\$7.95) is unique and the best I've had anywhere. It's really a half head of iceberg lettuce, split. They make an open "V" in the middle of the plate to construct a bed from a thick slice of tomato, crumbled bacon, and chunky blue cheese. It's big enough for a whole meal. We also tried the Beef Croustades (\$11.95), slices of beef tenderloin pounded flat and served with a crostini. This was the only dish we had that was merely good. For entrées, my wife chose Chilean sea bass (\$33.95), and I went for the 24-ounce porterhouse (\$44.95). The sea bass is a simple dish in which the quality of the ingredients is everything. They start with a superior piece of fish, broiled under a salamander (a device "named after the legendary reptile that was resistant to fire and lives in the bowels of the earth," according to *Larousse Gastronomique*) and drizzled with a buttery sauce. The difference between a lowly T-bone and a porterhouse is that the tenderloin side of the latter is much bigger. The III Forks' version is most definitely a porterhouse. Just as before, the meat was fiery hot and cooked as ordered at medium rare.

We had clairvoyant waitstaff; our food was delicious, and the wine capped everything off. There's something nice about feeling this pampered.

I've never been a big fan of steak houses. They are expensive and can sometimes feel stuffy. But III Forks has made me a convert. For a special event dinner, especially if you're a steak person, you'd have a hard time beating their combination of a luxurious setting, classy service, great food, and top-notch wines. III Forks is now Austin's best steak house.