

Restaurant Review: Jacksonville's III Forks is a sight to behold Southside steakhouse is 'an elegant, must-try-at-least-once restaurant'

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III Forks serves prime meat, such as this 8-ounce filet mignon, seafood and chops. The upscale restaurant also offers "local favorites" that include salads and sandwiches in the \$11.95 to \$19.95 price range.

We weren't a step in the front door of III Forks when my brother-in-law wondered aloud, "Are we in Jacksonville?"

This is no rip on our fair city. Rather it is an expression of astonishment at the grandeur of this new Southside Boulevard steakhouse. At the risk of being accused of overstatement, I think this is the most beautiful restaurant in Jacksonville.

If entering as we did from the back parking lot, the sight of the long aquarium of burning rocks instantly takes you aback. It is the first of several elegant decorative and architectural statements. There is no mistaking this as anything other than a steakhouse. It is done in rich wood and leather. It is a manly place.

At the front entrance, guests will gasp at the impressive glassed-in walls of wine. But they also can hope that they are not placed in the single, glass enclosed dining area. Talk about a dining spectacle. If you reserve that spot, you and your guests are on display for all to see.

My advice is to make reservations and arrive early to take advantage of the bar. With its high ceiling and ample seating, it is a comfortable place to enjoy a well-made cocktail or glass of wine. I enjoyed having a place to sit rather than lurch over another patron's shoulder at the bar in order to get a drink.

Like most upscale steakhouses, this is the haven for the business expense account and even during these times, corporate plastic is still being burned and this bar is a great way to unwind after a day of doing business or to begin the courtship that is the business dinner.

While on the subject, there is a small, private meeting area behind the bar as well as a full-scale meeting room for 30 or more complete with audio-visual gear.

OK you've got the picture; III Forks is one elegant restaurant. That said, the food left me wanting more.

After our drinks, we were taken to the spacious dining room. It is flanked on two sides with ample booths with a flock of four-top tables in the middle of the dining room. If there are two couples dining, ask for a booth because the regular tables are too small for all of the plates, flatware and soon-to-arrive bread, drinks and a bottle of wine and glasses. I feared that one table jostle would send everything toppling.

We began by sharing the Bacon Wrapped Scallops (\$12.95) and the Ahi Tuna (\$12.95). The three scallops were perfectly prepared with a snap when bitten into and then they melted in my mouth. The bacon gave them a rustic smoky flavor. My complaint is that at a restaurant like this sharing appetizers is a given, so why serve three? Serve two or four per order to avoid the awkward dish divvying. The Ahi Tuna, served in a hoisin rum sauce, were cooked rare, but cut into sliver thin slices. I didn't get much in the way of flavor or texture.

Being a steakhouse, we chose an 8-ounce Filet Mignon (\$31.95) and the 16-ounce Prime New York Strip (\$34.95). All of the beef is USDA Prime, so it was succulent and buttery. However, presentation was totally lacking. Because sides are served a la carte, the meat sits alone on a plate. It looked rather barren.

The Rack of Lamb (\$32.95), on the other hand, comes with four twin ribs, intertwined on the plate atop a red wine demi-glace with garlic and mushrooms. However, the promised light crust of stone-ground mustard and herbs mustard rub and aromatic French herbs was non-existent.

Maybe it is the way lamb are raised today, but there was little to distinguish it in flavor from beef. While not looking for mutton, I get more distinct lamb flavor from the chops I buy from my local grocer.

While flavor was hard to find in most dishes, the exception at our table was the Chilean Sea Bass (\$28.95). Served on top of wild rice, it was pearl white inside and tasted of the sea. I was most pleased that it had a distinct and pleasant flavor.

A La Carte always seems to be a ripoff at high-end steakhouses. I would have wanted the \$6.95 sides included with the entree, considering the hefty prices. The Six Cheese Potatoes seemed to have three cheeses too many as no one cheese flavor made a statement and the texture was a bit gummy. The Sautéed Spinach was a treat as it was warm but stood up to the heat and had a slight crunch.

If you're into desserts (\$7.95), order light because these made-in-house delights are huge. For example, the Chocolate Ganache that came by our table was as tall as two phonebooks stacked atop one another. Our rich Chocolate Mouse was served in one of the bucket-sized martini glasses that the kids gulp these days. It was more than enough for four to share.

It may sound as if I am overly critical. I enjoyed the meal, but wanted something more inventive with these dishes. A crusty Pittsburgh char on the steaks would have provided some character. However, I think that businessmen and executives will pooh-pooh my criticisms and claim III Forks as their own.

Those who want to experience III Forks without taking out a small loan should look to its "Local Favorites" menu that includes salads and beef sandwiches at an \$11.95 to \$19.95 price range. Sandwiches are served with fries.

III Forks is an elegant, must-try-at-least-once restaurant. With locations in Austin, Boca Raton, Dallas, Houston and Palm Beach Gardens, it shows that Jacksonville is continuing to make dining strides despite a down economy.