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GLOBE NORTH DINING OUT

The Boston Globe

New bistro deserves to be a regional draw

By Meredith Goldstein, Globe Staff | November 30, 2008

9 Elm American Bistro

9 Elm St.

Danvers

978-774-9436

www.9elm.com

Hours: Monday through Thursday, 4:30-9 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 4:3-10 p.m.; closed Sunday

All major credit cards accepted

Wheelchair accessible

I know you're trying to save money. I am too.

But if you can manage to part with about \$30, I'd ask that you spend it at 9 Elm American Bistro, a two-month-old restaurant in the heart of Danvers.

A meal there is worth the money, and frankly, I'd hate to see a great new eatery become a casualty of a bad economy when it deserves to be not only an Elm Street staple, but a culinary draw for the region.

Located in the space that used to be Grappa's, 9 Elm is cozy, with just nine tables and warm lighting. It's perfect for dates, but 9 Elm is also a fine meeting spot for singles and dining with friends. During my recent dinner, a number of women gathered at the small bar and chatted for hours over glasses of wine, while couples took over the small tables for two in the dining room.

My dining companion and I started with the butternut squash bisque (\$6) and the beet carpaccio (\$7). The bisque was a bit thin, but the filling beet salad made up for it. It was pretty too, with a circle of yellow beets surrounding lettuce topped with goat cheese and a glistening light balsamic.

We also ordered crab cake (\$9), which was served with a heap of chipotle aioli and a pile of greens that could have been a stand-alone salad. All three appetizers were large enough to share.

The grilled sirloin of beef (\$23) was the first indicator that 9 Elm doesn't skimp on its entrees. The thick slices of meat, smothered in a classic steak sauce, covered the plate.

Along with the beef, asparagus and at least a cup of homemade mashed potatoes are served.

My grandmother's friend in Florida used to make perfect mashed potatoes when I was a kid. I have no idea what the secret ingredient was, but someone at 9 Elm knows it.

My dining companion said it has always been her philosophy that the hardest ingredients to get right are chicken and vanilla (separately, of course). Both can signify something average on a menu, but if done just right, they can be exquisite.

My chicken proved her theory. The pan-roasted breast (\$19) was one of the more nondescript entrée options on the menu, but the free-range poultry was tender enough to cut with a fork, covered in just the right amount of light gravy, and served with a sweet orange root-vegetable puree and matching potato gnocchi. The colors and smells represented the best of fall.

We ordered the vanilla crème brulee (\$7) for dessert. I can't say that anything was wrong with the plate, but it

was average.

At our waitress's suggestion, we also ordered the bread pudding (\$7), which was unlike any version of the dessert I've had. Honestly, 9 Elm's bread pudding reminded us of pancakes. It was made with white chocolate and white bread from Martha's Bread Basket nearby. The caramel topping served as the most decadent of maple syrups. I wish I had saved some for breakfast the next day.

It's worth noting that had we stuck to an appetizer and two entrees, our check would have been under \$60. Not only that, on Monday and Tuesday nights, 9 Elm offers a three-course prix fixe menu for only \$24. Not a bad way to start a week.

So, again, I ask that you go spend some money at 9 Elm so that the restaurant - and its chicken and its bread pudding - are still there when I return. ■

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