

wonderful
DINING



"Iron Horse" by Judith Economos
and Jerome Harris Parmet.

NEW REIN FOR IRON HORSE

Pleasantville eatery keeps consistency, adds character

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREA KENNEDY

Converted from the former Pleasantville train station, the Iron Horse Grill is a relaxed, refined charmer providing steady calm amidst the hum of active train tracks and theater of daily commuters. After its recent ownership change, loyal locals will note distinct new impressions but also reliable mainstays that poise Iron Horse to carry on its legacy as sure as the Metro-North rolls by below.

"My wife Cathy and I owned the Iron Horse from its inception," says former owner and chef Philip McGrath. "For 15 years, we were fortunate enough to have a great run blessed with wonderful customers and a great staff. Now Andrew and his team will have the opportunity to make their mark on the Westchester dining scene."

Andrew, better known as Yonkers businessman and financier Andrew Economos, purchased the restaurant from McGrath in November and is no stranger to equine-themed restaurants.

"I had already been partnering with Rafael Palomino of Sonora in the new Larchmont restaurant Palomino, and really enjoyed designing and planning and testing and tasting there," says Economos. "Based on that experience, the chance to do Iron Horse was just too tempting to pass up."

Economos also partnered with McGrath at Pony Express plus their newer spot, Seahorse—both adjacent to Iron Horse—and worked with him for several weeks to ensure a seamless succession.

"We have been very happy to have a big legacy of customers from Pleasantville who are positive about how things are going," David Barrera says.

Barrera's one of the new installments at Iron Horse—a Manhattan transplant who operates front of house and warmly engages each guest with his spirited trademark greeting, "Please, welcome."

"We are lucky to get David as our manager and maître d'," Economos says. "He worked for 18 years at Vivolo and he was my favorite maître d' in Manhattan. He is smart, competent and one of the friendliest people I know."

When you meet Barrera, you understand the endorsement isn't inflated. On our visit, each party received thoughtful tableside attentiveness as efforts to develop his own lasting patron relationships were well under way. And familiar faces haven't gone anywhere since Economos and Barrera retained the previous staff. Regulars can still anticipate top-notch treatment from servers like longtime staffer Pat Alexander and expect consistent quality from Executive Chef Matt Ventura.

Similarly, the daily menu also maintains past favorites that are printed on the left side. We savored our starter, a packed stack of creamy tuna tartare, and finished with another favorite, the sweet, salty and also artfully stacked toasted pecan pie with butterscotch ice cream. Between the two superb selections, we feasted on meat. My tomahawk cut veal chop medium-rare caused pause to relish each juicy bite. (And with the generous cut, there were many, many bites.) My husband asked for his sirloin strip



Tuna tartare



Veal chop



Pecan pie

steak to be rarer and appreciated that it arrived with a cooler red center. Meats were simple yet sublime and my side of crispy salted Brussels sprouts was inspired.

The right side of the menu indicates where Iron Horse is making culinary headway courtesy of its new owner. Economos' concept, Crossroads of America, introduces menu offerings reflecting regional American dining.

"For about 30 years, I ran my own company and that involved a lot of travel, foreign and domestic," he says. "Part of the pleasure of all this travel was discovering regional cuisines. When I acquired a retired train station—including the interesting building itself—the idea of virtual train travel to different regions was a natural."

Our trip to Iron Horse included a pit stop in Boston for a lobster BLT salad as well as a tart blueberry lemonade that hit a home run worthy of Red Sox MVP David Ortiz. San Antonio is slated to be the next stop and New Orleans already whizzed by. You can still get a taste of Napa, whose offerings were so popular that a couple

of them stuck around the daily menu. Try the Aqua Pazza, or "crazy water," which Economos describes as "red snapper in a wonderful sauce full of clams and mussels," and panna cotta that's "dished in a gorgeous purple blueberry-wine reduction."

Think of the Crossroads menu as long-lived themed specials based on seasonally available ingredients and collaborative input. Economos explains how Iron Horse has assumed an all-hands-on-deck approach to conceptualizing dishes.

"David, the executive chef and I plan the menus, with, of course, the help and cooperation of the experienced Iron Horse staff," he says. "I find appropriate recipes and David has good recipes of his own. The kitchen (staffers) have their ideas of what will work and what they would like to do, and Pat, our most experienced server, has excellent suggestions for what she thinks customers would like."

Capitalizing on their collective strengths looks to be a driving force for the Iron Horse of the future, as does preserving its character of the past. And the name Economos has lent a wealth of character—the artful kind—long before Andrew Economos assumed ownership.

Judith Economos, Andrew's wife and celebrated artist, created the restaurant's paintings of platform scenes that feature the Iron Horse in the more literary sense. Depicting earlier days of the locomotive, her works evoke a nostalgia that's fortified by the Doppler hum of a passing train.

"I sought out photographs, because actual vintage trains are pretty hard to come by," she says. "The train platform scene is taken directly from a photograph hanging right in the restaurant."

While Judith is well-known for her sensuous nudes, perhaps her most popular subject is the horse—a sweet insight into her husband's selection of restaurant investment—and she collaborated with sculptor Jerome Harris Parmet to create the magnificent "Iron Horse" on the wall of the private dining alcove. From the literary to the literal sense, this horse of metal appears to gallop toward a sunlit window.

"For some reason I've always been able to draw horses without looking as well as humans and cats," says Judith, who also painted the palominos at Palomino. "My house has many horses, among other subjects. I love beauty, and I love anatomy, and I love the grace of dancers."

This spring, guests can look forward to more opportunities to dine amid Judith's art. In addition to serving dinner Tuesdays through Saturdays, Iron Horse was slated to add Sunday brunch and supper beginning March 30 and plans additional seatings when the time is right.

"We will extend our hours... depending on finding and training good cooks and wait staff," says Andrew Economos. "I won't settle for reduced quality."

Iron Horse Grill is at 20 Wheeler Ave. in Pleasantville. For reservations, call (914) 741-0717. ■