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ALLDAYS & ONIONS: VERMONT ICON GETS NEW DRIVER

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Spring is beginning to make its debut in the hills and mountains along the Vermont/New York border. That usually means sightings of robins, tulips -- and antique cars, particularly in Bennington.

The folks at Hemmings Motor News, the bible of the classic car field, have resumed parking glitzy vintage vehicles in front of their building after sheltering them for the winter. Here and there in front of neighboring Main Street businesses, spring flowers have been planted. At No. 519, the folks at Alldays & Onions (the name is an old British auto marque) are putting out some nice attractions of their own.

A&O was founded more than 15 years ago by Maureen O'Neil, who has sold the business to Dan and Julie Barker. They've made some interior changes, all in keeping with the country casual decor, but retained most of the staff, including chef Joe Gilleran. Smart moves all around.

The restaurant is located in a freestanding building with its own parking lot and screened cafe area. It remains a pleasant, minimalist place with eclectic artwork here and there, wood chairs and pillars, a wood bar in the center of the place and an airy feeling.

As we sipped before-dinner Manhattans, Constant Companion and I were a bit indecisive about making our entree selections from Gilleran's lengthy, tempting list. Appetizers were easier, particularly once Alyssa, our personable waitress, told us they were out of crab cakes. Both starters were winners.

Companion's chicken curry soup was a thick, creamy base chock full of bits of tender chicken and vegetables, with the earthy flavors of cumin and curry powder. Not as bold as the name might suggest, but a nicely nuanced concoction.

My Thai ``money bags'' were wonton wrappers cleverly hand-tied into pouches stuffed with gingered shrimp, deep fried -- a little too long -- and served atop greens with a bell pepper/red onion confetti and a kicky Chinese mustard dipping sauce.

The house salads -- field greens and baby spinach with cucumbers and tomatoes -- were good by themselves, made all the better by excellent house-made blue cheese and wasabi/cucumber dressings.

Then it was on to our entrees, which did not disappoint.

Companion's marinated, grilled chicken breasts were served with two mayo dipping sauces, one spicy, one garlic; she preferred the spicy. A pair of mixtures made good sides -- white rice/wild rice provided a nutty taste, and a toss of green beans, broccoli florets and cauliflower offered a counterpoint of textures and flavors.

Good as that dish was, I had to pronounce my sole dish the hands-down winner of the evening. Two pieces of delicate sole sauteed till just turning crisp on the edges, sandwiched around a generous layer of smoked salmon, the ``sandwich" coated in a rich melted brie.

Much as I usually dislike the ``one mix fits all entrees" school of side dishes, in this instance the aforementioned rice and veggie sides worked. Nevertheless, Gilleran might think about broadening that part of his repertoire. It doesn't always work.

Dessert seemed almost too much to contemplate after the generous courses. I won/lost the toss and selected one of the house-made offerings: a Key lime pie that was a worthy balance of sweet and tart with a moist crust.

Our bill, before tip, was \$65.12. That was as nice as the gasoline I bought at the Mobil station down the street on the way home at 20 cents less per gallon than I could find anywhere in the Capital Region.

A final note: For those auto buffs curious about Alldays & Onions -- a British company now called Alldays, Peacock & Co. Ltd. that has over the years made everything from cars to motorcycles to trolleys to Bunsen burners and industrial fans -- there's a book called ``Alldays & Onions: A Brief History," by Norman Painting (ISBN number 1 84306 047 7), from Landmark Collectors Library.

ALLDAYS & ONIONS 519 Main St. Bennington, Vt. 05201 Phone: (802) 447-0043. Web: <http://www.alldaysandonions.com> Credit cards: V, M, AE, D. Parking/access: Private lot. Good interior space. Hours: Breakfast, Monday-Saturday, 7:30 to 10:30 a.m. Lunch, Monday-Saturday, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Dinner, Tuesday-Saturday, 5 p.m. to closing. Brunch, Sunday, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Prices: Average entree \$15. Food/beverages (**): Modern fusion menu. Wine list, full bar. Service (**): Friendly, efficient. Atmosphere (**): Casual New England cafe. Overall rating: *** Key: One to four stars -- four exceptional, two average. Overall rating a rough average of the three categories with heaviest emphasis on food.

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