



Warm Your Bones

★★★ 1/2 Cottage Restaurant and Café

427 Farmington Ave., Plainville, 793-8888.
All major credit cards

A meal that starts with chicken liver paté, fresh baked breads and honey butter, moving on to pork, duck and sausage, is destined to end either before dessert, or in a state of distressing fullness, or both. That's how it went when we ate at the Cottage Restaurant and Café in Plainville. The chef at the Cottage modifies the menu throughout the year to spotlight seasonal vegetables or dishes and, it being the cold, dark stretch of winter, the fare tends toward the big, hearty, meaty meals that inspire a kind of hibernation — food that tells your body it's OK to slow down and sleep for a while, to bulk up in preparation for the spring. A message that not everyone wants their body to hear.

The Cottage is a completely unpretentious restaurant with an elegant menu, friendly, accommodating and attentive service and a calm, subdued atmosphere that gives the place the hint of a nondescript hotel conference room. Lisa and I settled right in to a quiet corner of the small space. Louis Armstrong sang the Duke Ellington songbook over the stereo. A menu with varied French and German flavors, plus hints of New Orleans, made the option of sampling one of the Belgian ales seem tempting. The Cottage also has a page-long martini menu, but Lisa and I opted for glasses of the house Cabernet and Merlot, both of which had substance to stand up to the flavorful food.

Executive Chef Patty Queen had prepared a special oxtail soup, which sounded worth sampling, but a few other dishes won out. We ordered a cranberry salad with mixed mesclun greens tossed in a vinaigrette with roasted walnuts, poached pear and goat cheese. There was a battle between sweet and tart going on in the salad, and the sweet only barely triumphed. The bitterness of the greens, pungency of the goat cheese and strength of crispy fried scallions all lined up to offset the sweetness of the cranberry and pear. But, for better or worse, the fruitiness was the defining flavor. The salad looked smart on the plate too — purples, greens, and blobs of white cheese topped with wispy strips of fried scallions. These scallions were more than just show; they added a subtle crunch.

After the salad, we had a beautiful bowl of huge, whole Gulf shrimp in a Cajun sauce, loaded down with a papaya salsa. The shrimp were propped up on a thin piece of grilled bread, which served as an effective vehicle for sopping up the piquant and spicy, yet sweet, brown sauce. Between the sauce and the salsa, the shrimp became an afterthought. There was the tang of citrus, a whiff of vinegar, subtle burn of garlic and a taste of blackened spice.

As unlikely and ill-advised as it seems now, from there we moved on to a grilled

jumbo pork chop for Lisa, and an enormous cast-iron pan full of cassoulet with sausage, pork and duck. Before digging in, our waitress cautioned us to leave room for dessert, which seemed pretty unlikely.

The cassoulet was like a culinary *War and Peace* — it was daunting, intimidating and rewarding, and it was likely I wouldn't finish it. There were slices of tender pork on top of pieces of strong-tasting duck, all in a stew of white beans and big hunks of sausage. This did not have that otherworldly crust that cassoulet fanatics obsess over, and there wasn't the powerful rosemary flavor that I associate with the dish, but it was good and way beyond filling. It fit the bill as a winter special.

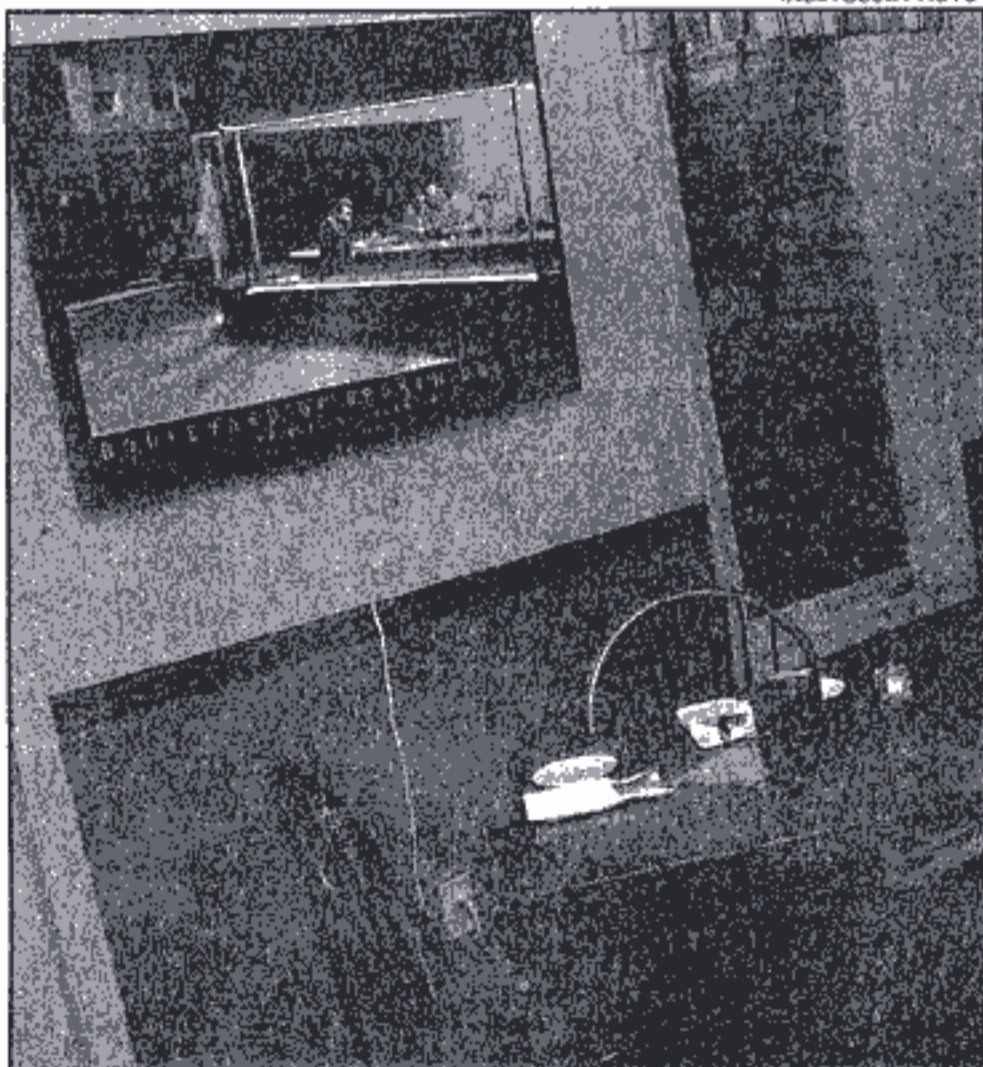
Not wanting to be outdone, Lisa ordered the apple cider brined grilled jumbo pork chop. Here was another formidable plate of food — a pork chop befitting Henry VIII, a whole baked red onion stuffed, completely, with bleu cheese, a spicy apple quince compote and a thick fried potato cake. The chop had a dark and sweet caramelized outer crust. The pork, the onion and the potato cake all said heavy, but the compote furnished a nice fruity lift to the meal.

Anyone wanting to mix and match on their own can do pretty well piecing together offerings from the side selections at the Cottage. Depending on the day, there might be chicken grilled with rosemary, grilled trout, asparagus or portobello mushroom fries with lemon aioli.

When the time came to consider desserts, we were faced with avocado cheesecake and a bread pudding, among other things, but despite the early warnings to exercise restraint, we had to settle for coffee.

We spent \$73 for the meal. ■

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Let the substantial fare at the Cottage help get you through the cold months.