



Wednesday, December 2, 2009

## Opening of Ill Forks Restaurant in Southside

Last night I went to a reception honoring the opening of Ill Forks (pronounced "three forks" <http://www.iiiforks.com/>) Jacksonville's newest fine dining establishment. Three Forks is a prime steakhouse that started in Dallas, Texas and soon branched out to two other locations in Texas and two in Florida. The Jacksonville location is Ill Fork's newest restaurant location. I had an awesome time! The food was absolutely incredible and the actual restaurant... I've never seen anything like it. You HAVE to go try it for yourself soon... trust me you won't be disappointed.

Before you go, one thing I should mention is that you might not find it on your navigation system. Last night, as my husband, Jim and I (who as a couple are directionally challenged and rely waaay too much on navigation) got lost and had to call the restaurant for directions. Mapquest recognizes the address, though so just mapquest the restaurant before you go and you'll be fine. Ill Forks is located in Tapestry Park which is near the intersection of Southside Blvd and Gate Parkway. You turn onto Gate Parkway from Southside and then make a right onto Deer Lake Drive. You'll see the restaurant about a quarter mile down on the left.

Jim and I were a little late, so we parked and hurried up to the main entrance of the restaurant. This restaurant really defies description... but of course I'll try. There's an outdoor patio area with beautiful fountains, plasma TVs, and plush cozy chairs and tables. The most impressive and eye catching feature of the outdoor area had to be this huge smooth concrete table with a fire in the center! Yes, a fire. The fire was dancing on top of glittering black rocks and encased in glass. This patio area was filled with people, lounging, talking laughing, sipping wine and sampling plates of appetizers.

I tore my eyes away from the mesmerizing patio area and looked around Tapestry Park a little. Tapestry Park looks really new and it's beautiful. It has kind of a medieval look about it (cobblestone streets, little towers, stone archways) -- reminds me of Palencia. Located in Tapestry Park are a few restaurants, retail stores, a hair salon, condos and a hotel. <http://www.tapestryparkcondos.com/>

Right in front of the restaurant is a valet service. Also at the front of the restaurant were two representatives from Jacksonville Magazine taking pictures of guests in front of their trademark backdrop. I love Jacksonville Magazine, (it's a magazine all about events in Jacksonville) it's like my bible. I read it cover to cover every month. I strolled right up to the backdrop for a picture (and a chance to gush about how much I love the magazine) before finally heading into the restaurant.

The inside of the restaurant was even more unique and impressive than the outside. I spotted glass enclosed fires (similar to the one I saw on the patio) in several spots in the dining room. Situated right in the center of Ill Forks was a huge glass enclosed wine cellar that housed thousands of wine bottles (all perfectly positioned with their labels facing out). Right behind the wine cellar was a private glass enclosed room with a table for 6-8 people.

From the hostess station, I was led over to the bar area where the reception was being held. The bar is huge, and wraps all along the back of the spacious bar area. Situated along the other walls of the bar area were tables of hors d' oeuvres, desserts and wine. The aroma was heavenly and I couldn't wait to dig in. The bar was packed with reception guests, but I managed to pick up a lovely glass of chardonnay pretty quickly. I then headed over to the line for the food while I sipped my wine.

As we waited in line, we were greeted by servers handing out hors d' oeuvres from silver platters. Every time one passed me, I was sure to sample what they were serving, it was all so good! Among the goodies I sampled were toasted french bread topped with small strips of tender fillet mignon seasoned with creole mustard, ahi tuna with some kind of Asian wasabi sauce, and slices of toasted french bread topped with chunks of creamy mozzarella and fresh tomato drizzled with balsamic vinaigrette. The service was awesome! Servers dressed in all black with gold name tags greeted me every few minutes to offer me an appetizer, or bring me another glass of wine. Everyone was so nice!

In between sips of wine and big bites of appetizers, I managed to meet a really nice guy named Ryan, a graphic designer for Renaissance Creative. Renaissance Creative handled the Public Relations for the evening. <http://www.renaissancecreative.com/> Ryan took me and Jim's picture and then chatted with us for a few minutes. I told him about "Out and About in Jax", and he asked me about some of the upcoming events going on in Jacksonville. "I'm 22 and new in town. What is there to do around here?" he asked. This is a question that might take me hours to answer, but instead of answering, I changed the subject drastically and put him on the spot. (A glass or two of chardonnay does that to me.)

Right around the time I was grabbing desserts, I heard the tinkling of forks on glasses, followed by silence. Then from somewhere in the room, I heard the general manager of the restaurant, Curtis Osmond addressing the crowd. He thanked us all for coming and talked a little about the restaurant. He also mentioned a charity promotion going on December 1st-3rd. Net proceeds from the sales of any gift cards bought will go to the Sulzbacher Center for the homeless. I thought that was really awesome. What a great way to give a unique Christmas gift while also giving to a great cause!

I tried really hard to pay attention to what Mr. Osmond was saying, but I'd passed the dessert table and was now dangerously close to a table of gourmet seafood. My attention was dragged away from the speech by the biggest, most mouthwatering looking pan seared scallops I'd ever seen. I broke the silence around me by gawking and exclaiming "OHMIGOD those scallops are HUGE!" Jim shushed me, and the sweet gentleman serving them chuckled and quietly asked if I'd like one. He put one on my plate and gingerly topped it with lemon beurre blanc sauce. Next I approached a gorgeous ice sculpture adorned with the Ill Forks logo sitting in the middle of a huge dish of giant shrimp. I helped myself to a couple of shrimp and then was served a large crab cake topped with creole mustard that smelled divine. Next it was onto the carving table where we were served strips of rare rib eye and fillet mignon. By this time my plate was full and looked so amazing, I practically sprinted out to the patio area so I could eat.

We found seats at the lovely table with the glass enclosed fire in the center. The cool night air, coupled with the lovely surroundings, and the sounds of party goers chatting and jazz music softly playing in the background created an amazing atmosphere. I'm sure at this point it goes without saying, but the food was incredible! The steak was tender and flavorful, and the crab cake melted in my mouth. I've never had scallops so perfect. Even the creme brulee was perfect, and if you've ever attempted to make creme brulee, you know how challenging that is.

As I ate, I wrote notes in my little black notebook I typically bring to events. "If you're a food critic, you HAVE to try the crab cakes," said a tipsy woman with short hair seated next to me at the bar. "I loathe crab cakes," she told me, "But after having the crab cakes here, it made me want to run in there and knock over every person in that line to get another one." I started laughing... the mental image of her plowing through the dressy party guests like a linebacker and grabbing crab cakes was hilarious. But after having a bite or two of the tender flavorful crab cake, I completely understood.

"Oh, I'm not really a food critic," I corrected her between mouthfuls, "I just write about events." But she had decided I was a food critic, and she gave me a detailed review of every appetizer passed to her by a server. She would tell me things like, "I like the ahi tuna. The spicy sauce pairs nice with the cool tuna and has a nice flavor," and "the french bread has a great crunch to it, and goes really great with the tender steak." She cracked me up. The minute I finished polishing off everything on my plate, a server seemed to appear out of nowhere to take my plate and offer to get me another glass of chardonnay. I was just so impressed by how attentive the servers were.

With a fresh glass of chardonnay in my hand, and my appetite completely satisfied, I decided it was time to mingle. I managed to get a few minutes to talk to Curtis Osmond, the general manager of the restaurant. He impressed me so much. Even though he must have been incredibly busy, he treated me like I was the only guest at the restaurant. He appeared genuinely happy to meet me and even complimented me on my smile (I think I was blushing, and I don't usually blush.) He seemed so relaxed, and if I were hosting a huge party and trying to make sure to serve perfect food to hundreds of guests, I might be stressed, but he seemed perfectly at ease. And he should have -- everything was going along so smoothly. The guests were pleased, the food was perfect and plentiful, and the service was impeccable.

He told me a little about the restaurant. The dishes they serve are obviously mostly steaks and seafood and range in price from \$13-\$37, not too pricey. "We really want this to be a place for all occasions," Curtis told me, "From date night, to a dinner with friends, to a place for a business dinner." He even explained that for special occasions, they have three private rooms. The "wine room" I spotted behind the wine cellar seats 6, there's a room behind the bar that seats 8 called the "poker room", and then a separate private dining room that seats 30 called the "captains room". If guests want to book any of these private rooms or host any other events at Ill Forks, they just call the restaurant and speak to the special events coordinator, Kelly McGwin.

Curtis also told me he has over 20 years of experience in the restaurant business. He started at the Ill Forks in Dallas. He helped open the location in Austin and ran that restaurant for 3 years before moving to Jacksonville to start this location. "Why Jacksonville?" I asked him.

"Well, we didn't really choose Jacksonville, Jacksonville chose us!" he laughed. Then he explained that business professionals from Jacksonville who do a lot of travel and who'd dined at some of the other Ill Forks locations started calling and asking for a location in Jacksonville. "We came out here, fell in love with the city and really fell in love with Tapestry Park," he told me

I complimented him on the great idea to have a fundraiser for the Sulzbacher Center and asked him what gave him that idea. "We like to develop deep roots in the community and finding a good local charity to help out is a great way to do that. I really like the Sulzbacher Center, they do amazing work."

After we chatted for a few minutes, Curtis introduced me to Executive Chef Joe Everett. Chef Everett must have been very busy but he took a few minutes to talk to me and was very personable and charming. "Our goal at Ill Forks is to have the best available food simply prepared. The other guys can try to beat us but they won't," he laughed. He also explained, "Ill Forks is an all prime steakhouse. That means that every single cut of beef in the restaurant is USDA Prime, which is the best beef in the US. Less than 2% of the beef in the US qualifies as US Prime. Many steakhouses offer some prime beef, but ALL our beef is prime. Very few steakhouses in the US can say that."

Soon it was time to leave, and I finally did that, reluctantly. I couldn't believe what an amazing night it was. I can't wait to go back to Ill forks for a date night or a dinner out with friends.