



Though dishes like almond-crusted swordfish grace the menu, Peterson's owner Carl Bruggemeier, left, and chef Karl Benko stake their reputation on their beef entrees.

THE PETERSON'S PRINCIPLE

With its monster filets, hearty sauces and wine lockers by the roomful, a new Fishers steak house plans to make gluttons of us all **BY JULIA SPALDING**

A FEW YEARS AGO A GIANT FRISCH'S BIG BOY hoisted a hamburger the size of a kiddie pool above Ind. 37's overworked Fishers exit, becoming an eager, cowlicked beacon of old-school dining in a new-money neighborhood. But eating habits have apparently shifted. In the very spot where the Double Decker once ruled, a fussy waitstaff dressed like Clinique counter minions storms the now flawlessly elegant dining room, laden with crab lobster and 20-ounce New York strips for well-heeled patrons.

Peterson's, the building's stylish new tenant, would like you to forget about all that thousand-island-dressing-on-a-bun stuff. And it's easy to do so. Under the direction of Carl Bruggemeier (a noted restaurateur from Cincinnati who created the Ciao Baby chain of Mediterranean trattorias and now serves as managing partner of Peterson's), the suburban steak house favors white tablecloths and breathtaking presentation. It shows in such stunning dishes as the tuna tartare appetizer with cucumber noodles and sake, and the way the lab-coated servers

PHOTOGRAPHY BY E. ANTHONY VALLANIS



Peterson's offers a 14-ounce double filet that's kissed with a bourbon veal jus.

walk around with their hands uniformly clasped in front of them, programmed for your dining pleasure.

Upscale casual is what they call it. It means male customers must tuck in their polo shirts before sliding down the antennas on their cell phones and stepping into the Peterson's lobby, a space so rich and dark you have to adjust your eyes to make out the hostess stand, or to read the *Wine Spectator* and *Cigar Aficionado* magazines set out on Mission-style end tables. In place

of lightness, there are gorgeous black-stained mahogany cabinets with brushed silver hardware, hazy art-deco wall sconces and deep, manly armchairs like something from Frank Lloyd Wright's study.

The place practically swaggers, something one can expect from a restaurant that sends around both a strolling saxophone player and a black-and-white photographer on weekend nights and offers certain repeat customers a \$150 Peterson's Patrons Card that pretty much guarantees

they'll get a table anytime they want one. When our server sat down three tiny plates of sweet crabmeat and field greens under a subtle olive oil dressing and recited, "This is an *amusee*, which is French for amusement. The chef hopes you are amused by it," we wondered where all of this was leading. The menu – two pages of big, expensive side dishes and red meat recidivism – made it all deliciously clear.

Sullivan's Steakhouse explored this lavish territory two years before Peterson's wedged its first head of iceberg, but the steak and high-ball glass trend still has plenty of life in it. "If you eat all of that, you are going to have a heart attack," a friend admonished her husband, who had to scoot his Absolut and soda out of the way to get a good angle on Peterson's 14-ounce double filet, which stands a good two inches off the plate. Still, he

took one longing look at this Anna Nicole Smith of steak and promptly devoured every last bourbon veal jus-kissed morsel. Chef Karl Benko seasons this cut with caramelized butter, salt and pepper before cooking it – all of which we learned after checking ourselves for clogged arteries and moving on to the *creme brulee*.

Nothing is done in moderation here, where even the steamed asparagus (a stack of jumbo sticks for \$5.50) looks like the coach put it on steroids. Our table groaned

PETERSON'S

LOCATION: 7690 E. 96th St., Fishers

PHONE: 588-8863

HOURS: M-Th 5:30-10 p.m., 5:30-11 p.m. F-Sa

CUISINE: Large, elaborate steak and seafood dishes.

PEDIGREE: Managing partner Carl Bruggemeier's impressive resume ranges from work at the famous Tavern on the Green in New York City

to serving as managing director of three Brennan's restaurants. He founded (and eventually sold his interest in) a chain of Mediterranean trattorias called Ciao Baby. To head the kitchen, Bruggemeier hired Karl Benko, former executive chef for Sullivan's Steakhouse.

DÉCOR: Speakeasy dim, with a heavy dose of polished mahogany and brushed silver. It's the kind of place that

makes you feel underdressed. If only the tables weren't so close together. Due to the size of the bar opening, state law requires that all customers 18 and under be accompanied by a parent.

SERVICE: Generally likeable and well-trained, but check their math when the bill comes.

PRICES: Very high. A la carte steaks range from \$21 for a petite filet to \$34.50 for the 20-ounce New York

strip. Sides are sold separately, for about \$5, and feed two or more.

DON'T MISS: The double filet.

MISS: The a la carte mashed potatoes, which contain more portobello than the average person can handle.

IF YOU LIKE THIS PLACE, TRY: Sullivan's Steakhouse, which offers a nearly identical menu of steaks and aggressively seasoned side orders, although not as meticulously executed.

under the weight of our two seafood entrees, seared yellowfin tuna and almond-crusted swordfish. The tuna stayed dripping moist inside its thick black pepper crust, although the treatment might be a jolt for anyone not expecting so much fire in the mouth. Mercifully, the fish sits in sweet port wine glaze, with Napa onion salad piled off to the side. The swordfish sported a dense topcoat of slivered almonds, a nice, crunchy accent to the mild and firm meat. Too bad the zesty bourbon veal jus and gluey, oversalted risotto cake made the dish too busy and left me thinking, "Something has to go."

Shellfish get plenty of recognition on the menu, a significant portion of which is dedicated to chilled oysters (three different species at \$1.50 each – I could just see the line cooks back there counting) and something called crab lobster (actually a bisected baby Maine lobster). The Combo – a large iced platter of steamed crab lobster, four oysters and two giant shrimp – arrived at our table, barely, after the server nearly lost control of the tray twice. The oysters proved fresh and silky and the shrimp as plump as anyone could expect – and we expected quite a bit, having paid \$12.95 per person for the luxury. We mined the crab lobster for sweet, tender meat, and indulged ourselves with all four of the accompanying dipping sauces – especially the garlicky aioli we used on everything.

An exceptional wine list boasts more than 155 labels and 65 wines sold by the glass to complement triple-cut lamb loin chops, veal porterhouse and seven different seafood entrees that I can only describe as rococo. The jumbo lump crab steak includes Old Bay polenta, green peppercorn sauce and sautéed spinach, while the grilled Maine diver sea scallops sit on roasted vegetable risotto with truffle oil. (Prices are just as stratospheric as for the steaks, with only two main courses, triple cut pork chop with mustard sauce and pan roasted chicken vesuvio, coming in under \$20.)

This newcomer realizes that competition is intense in Indy's red meat district. Hence the *amusees*; handwritten thank-you cards sent to customers' homes; and other gambits to keep the restaurant from becoming too Ruth's Chrisy. For the record, Bruggemeier doesn't plan on turn-

ing this restaurant into a chain.

For a \$500 initiation fee and \$100 annual fee, his customers can be members of the wine club and use one of the personal wine lockers lining the lobby's mahogany-and-brushed silver wall. Little gold plates on the front of each door are engraved with the names of people much cooler than you. Ditto for the \$50-a-year humidors inside the hostess stand, which cigar club members can use after a \$250 initiation fee.

Even without all the pomp and circumstance, this restaurant deserves a spot on Indy's restaurant A-list. The food and atmosphere should have all the other high-end eateries north of Kessler Boulevard looking over their shoulders. But there's also the possibility that it's just *too* good. Weeks after the restaurant replaced the Big Boy accoutrements with a big city-style green awning, a family of four, underdressed in nylon jogging suits, ambled through the door expecting hamburgers on toasted buns, coleslaw on the side and double fudge cake for dessert.

"Do you have a reservation?" the perfectly coifed hostess asked the confused foursome. Harry Connick Jr. crooned a standard over the speakers, and somebody in the front dining room ordered an iceberg wedge with walnut-Gorgonzola dressing.

I think I detected disappointment in their eyes.