

At the Mashantucket Pequot Museum, the cuisine is a work of art, too



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Lobster roll at Pequot Cafe (Alex Nunes/The Day)

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By **Alex Nunes**

Gourmands follow an unspoken, yet unshakable, code when getting their intellectual fill at museums and institutes of history or high culture: Do lunch before, or do dinner after.

Otherwise, you're likely to wind up in some contrived, oppressively sunlit courtyard setting, watching Belgian tourists attempt, in futility, to steady their wobbly wrought-iron tables, as you struggle to make sense of the rubbery mozzarella that serves as the mantle of your conveyer-belt Caprese sandwich, and your spouse tragically flails, like a fawn learning to walk, in pursuit of some sense of agency over his or her limping, flopping slice of pizza.

It's enough to make a grown man weep.

But I can say now that there is at least one museum where the in-house food is not just palatable, not just good — but great, a place where you may go simply for the meal and decide to catch the exhibits another day (this is, in fact, allowed).

Enter stage right, the most singular of museum dining experiences and a beacon for the adventurous, the seekers of the novel: Pequot Café at the Mashantucket Pequot Museum & Research Center in Mashantucket.

When I first entered the cafe, located on the museum's fourth floor, I was struck by the dining space: a vast hall entirely naturally lit on that day by a two-to-three story wall of glass windows looking out to reservation woods.



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Venison skewers at Pequot Cafe (Alex Nunes/The Day)

To the left is the kitchen and the counter where you order. There are no hostesses or servers; everything, save for ringing you out at the register, is taken care of by a few prep cooks stationed behind the glass, deli-like displays.

Because of the seemingly bare-bones operation, I was a bit skeptical of the ambitious menu: turtle soup (\$9.95), supreme lobster roll over Indian fry bread (\$15.95), frog legs (\$13.95), crab cakes (\$13.95), lobster fritters (\$13.95), and venison grilled on skewers (\$13.95), to name a few items.

How are these two guys gonna pull that off in enough time to keep this line moving and get me back to the exhibits within the hour?

Well, many of the sides are already prepared, and the soup was already stewing over low heat; the batters were ready in advance for frying and the crab cakes packed tight for a sizzling on the flat grill. In total, I was in and out of line in under 10 minutes, most of that time spent mingling around the register and eyeballing such snacks and packaged goods as Tanka buffalo jerky, Chickasaw Nation chocolate bars, White Earth wild rice flour, and Red Lake Nation preserves.



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Strawberry shortcake at Pequot Cafe (Alex Nunes/The Day)

Appetizers are difficult to choose from: the aforementioned turtle soup, fritters, and frog legs, as well as corn nugget fritters (\$3.25), stuffed quahogs (\$5.50), two different chowders (quahog and corn; both \$5.95), and beef chili (\$5.95).

I went with the options I knew I would not see elsewhere — frog legs, turtle soup, and lobster fritters.

The frog legs are seasoned, lightly battered, and given a good crispin' in the deep fryer. It'd been years since I'd had frog legs, and these ones reminded me just how delicious they can be. Savory and tender, and, at the risk of sounding cliché, with an overall taste quite reminiscent of chicken.

The turtle soup was beyond dynamic. Marketed as the "signature soup," it's a thick mix of turtle meat, wild rice, green onion, kale, green beans, tomato, garlic and spices. Immensely flavorful, with a surprising kick.

The lobster fritters, a special right now (quahog fritters are on the permanent menu), can be best described as a cross between a Rhode Island clam cake and a Southern hush puppy. The texture has a grittier corn meal influence; the lobster pieces are substantial and plenty, and the flavor is peppery and distinct.

If, by the time you've finished these appetizers, you still have room for your entree, you will be handsomely rewarded.

By this time of summer — nearly mid-August — I thought it impossible for me to get too excited about a lobster roll. But the version at Pequot Café is unusual enough to feel like new ("just like starting over," John Lennon might say of this crustaceous delight).

The minimally chopped chunks of lobster meat are warmed over the grill simply with butter and served atop Indian fry bread, a doughy, deep fried circle most readily compared to fried dough. For anyone accustomed to mayonnaise-centric lobster salad over grilled hot dog bun, this iteration is a lovely point of departure, noteworthy for both its flavor and crispy, chewy texture.

The venison skewers anchor a complete and thoughtful dish that comes with sides of butternut squash and "three sisters' rice" (wild rice, corn, squash and beans). Cooked over an open flame, the venison is seasoned with garlic, red pepper, red onion, and Devil's Belt Sea Salt. The only warning here would be for medium rare types. Venison, being exceptionally lean meat, may strike some as chewy or even tough.

The crab cakes, a chef's favorite, are made from blue claw crab meat that gets sautéed in aromatic veggies, lightly mixed with bread crumbs and fried to a modest crisp. Among the most flavor-filled crab cakes I've tasted, these two patties come served with butternut squash and coleslaw.

After a vigorous-enough walk through the museum's many exhibits, I returned to the cafe a few hours later, hungry enough for dessert.

The options here are equally tantalizing and hard to choose from: blueberry slump (blueberries simmered with dumplings and sweetened with Pequot maple syrup; priced at \$4.95), strawberry shortcake topped with homemade whipped cream (\$4.95), and a chocolate cupcake with gooey ganache (\$3.95) round out the permanent options on the menu.

I opted to go with the strawberry shortcake, which was described as fresh strawberries over a buttermilk biscuit but came served over Indian fry bread instead. However, I hardly minded the delicious mix-up. I also went with a dessert special, coconut cupcake with Callebaut white chocolate ganache and house-made whipped cream (\$3.95). The cake was light and less sweet than I expected, with a corn meal taste and texture. The ganache was smooth, and the entire treat was tied together nicely with shreds of coconut.

At the end of the day, a thought struck me: Museum food can be good, and at Pequot Café it's even better.

If you go

Pequot Café

110 Pequot Trail, Mashantucket

(860) 411-9671

pequotmuseum.org/Restaurant/

Food type: Native American

Service: Quick and accommodating

Price: Moderate

Hours: 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday

Credit cards: Visa, MasterCard

Handicap access: Yes