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British-style pub does bang-up job DINING REVIEW

By Bob Datz Telegram & Gazette Reviewer

The Copper Stallion

538 Main St., Sturbridge ★★★★★ copperstallion.com **Phone:** (508) 347-2100 **Hours:** Noon-9 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday, noon-10 p.m. Friday and Saturday, noon-8 p.m. Sunday. **Parking and access:** ramp from rear parking lot **Credit cards:** MasterCard, Visa, American Express **Reservations:** Recommended Friday and Saturday evenings **Prices:** Medium-high, entrées \$13 to \$25, many not including salads **Pluses:** Fresh, fresh ingredients, excellent cooking and relaxed, pub atmosphere — classy but not snotty. **Minuses:** Short-staffed on this night

A fresh and uplifting experience, on and off the plate, is The Copper Stallion, a somewhat hidden nugget along Route 20 in the Fiskdale section of Sturbridge. We're talking pub in the British style, from its inspired queen's huntsman selections to the often-electrifying Premier League brand of soccer beaming from a flat screen behind the bar.

It's British but not boring. Dinners from Caribbean Jerk Pork (\$16.95) to lobster ravioli (\$18.95) and a few vegetarian and steak entrées show The Copper Stallion can be as boundless as that empire where the sun never set. (People schooled under MCAS are excused by our Commonwealth from recognizing historical references.)

Folks of all legal ages were dining it up and drinking it down pretty early on a recent holiday Thursday. And lest anyone think they were trading away New England for Old, a warm cup of clam chowder could wash them back ashore. It had clams and spuds aplenty in a tongue-clinging broth, but throw the clams away and the red potatoes alone would be worth it. Fresh and cooked just enough to maintain a fine friction with the tooth, the spuds rivaled those from my own garden.

The cup left room to sample two apps. Fried zucchini sticks (\$6.95) were crunchily breaded and filled with zucchini softly cooked, piping hot and served with a spiced marinara. This yummy selection can also be had as one-third of one of the three samplers on a 14-item appetizer menu. But the stand-alone order was generous, with more than a dozen sticks.

Even the thick garlic humus (\$4.95) had the homemade touch, not whipped too smoothly and succeeding as a comfort food when wrapped in wonderfully warm pita bread, again very fresh.

The side salad that came with my companion's dinner wasn't flamboyant — red pepper and cukes around green leaf lettuce — but the place brags of using locally grown produce and that's not in abundance right now. Anyway, the vinaigrette was of the viscous variety, rich and tasty without being especially peppery.

She had more than she could handle with the Grand National Mixed Grille (\$18.95), from the British traditional section of the menu. Over a bed of rice pilaf were generous slices of broiled chicken breast, unbelievable bangers (sausages) and marinated sirloin tips in a spicy rub. I managed to pry a sample of the sirloin out of her and knew immediately why she made that an accomplishment. These pork tenderloin bangers are a locally prepared breed of sausage that can both draw you in with their own mace-based flavor and make a fine beer or ale taste that much better.

They appear elsewhere on that section of the menu sharing the lead in "Bangers and Mash" (\$14.95) with garlic mashed potatoes. Nearby are fish and chips (\$14.95) and a chicken potpie (\$13.95). But the most tempting dish I didn't order is the \$15.95 "signature" and heaping cottage pie — ground sirloin with garden carrots, corn and peas, "secret seasonings" and topped with the garlic mashed potatoes, all baked together and topped with gravy and melted cheese.

In a lighter-weight mood, I was fine with shrimp and scallop sauté, at \$17.95 an exemplary rendition of succulent seafood in a cream sauce with mushrooms and the greatest grated cheese that needed no reinforcement.

My poor, somewhat-full companion labored with the scrumptious slab of apple cobbler a la mode she ordered for dessert. Enough for two, but I beat her to the finish line with a decent crème brûlée served with whipped cream.

By this time the place was full, what with only 13 tables, and what we were told was a server sick-call resulted in a bit slower service. But that wouldn't be enough to mar the impression for this as a dinner spot, much less its appeal to the soccer fan or Anglophile with a post-imperial culinary world view.

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