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The Hack-Ma-Tack Inn on the Cheboygan River won Express reader's award for "Best Riverside Dining" in 2003.

DINING OUT

By Len Barnes

"Undiscovered gem" is not a label we casually pin on a restaurant. Hack-Ma-Tack Inn deserves it.

A lucky stopover on a day's float through Michigan's Inland Waterway on a rented pontoon boat earned this place the designation for ambience, service, attitude and very reasonably priced food. While "gourmet" has been bestowed on more and more Northern Michigan eateries recently, we'd not even heard the name Hack-Ma-Tack since we covered it many years ago.

Chilled by our windy but delightful all-day cruise on Crooked Lake, across Burt Lake through Indian River, across Mullet Lake, we tied up at this Inn's 500 foot-long dock on the Cheboygan River about 5 p.m. The rustic 200-foot-long, two-story log building was inviting, as it must be to those who cruise here from Michigan yacht clubs in summer, or from nearby Burt Lake summer homes. (It's just as inviting, we're sure, to those who arrive by land, as many do.)

Personable owners Susan and Mike Redding say that Hack-Ma-Tack was built in 1894 by the late Watson Beebe as a private hunting and fishing lodge, which Roy Perry, a retired AAA Michigan claims executive, ran until they bought it in 1981.

We entered the glass-walled Pow Wow bar area with log ceilings, walls and summoned a very dry Tanqueray martini. Could it have anchovy olives, we asked bartender Mickey? It could and it did and it was excellent, bone dry at \$6.

We sat at one of several tables around a large stone fireplace which dominates one wall, with a Jim Foote duck painting over it and a collection of old glass bottles behind the bar.

Jim LeBlanc, a certified Japanese-Indian chef, has chuffed before at the Detroit Marriott AAA Three Diamond restaurant. The 16 entrees he prepares could be classified almost gourmet because quality ingredients are used, with appropriate preparation. It's American cooking, and if you seek "blackened" Cajun anything or a fancy French sauce, don't come here.

Suitably warmed, we adjourned to the dining room seating 125. Through its large picture windows, front and side, we felt almost as if we were sitting outdoors, surrounded by greenery. A well-clipped lawn 200 feet across the Cheboygan River was visible through the cedar and birch trees.

Former DNR Commissioner Harry Whiteley found his 8 oz. filet mignon (\$28.95) to be very fine after a jumbo shrimp cocktail (five large ones) at \$9.95. His wife Betty had lightly dipped batter-fried shrimp for \$24.95 after French onion soup (\$2.95). My wife Ellen liked the whitefish almondine at \$20.95, which the Inn calls nationally famous. She tried the onion ring platter first.

I had the prime rib of beef regular cut for \$24.95 (16-18 oz.). I could have had the large cut 24-26 oz. at \$28.95, or the "chef's cut" two-pounder for big appetites at \$33.95, after a marinated herring in sour cream at \$7.95. Other guests like the New England clam chowder with rich

creamy flavor at \$7.95 or Win Schuler's bar cheese for \$4.95 with deep fried mushrooms. Chicken chips for kids here are \$7.95.

With dinners come tossed salad, potato, fresh baked bread and spring water. We could have had NY strip steak, \$28.95 or Diamond Jim Ribeye USDA choice, \$24.95, honey mustard chicken, \$21.95, or lobster tails or surf and turf. "Lite side" menu is chicken, whitefish, or a pork chop at \$19.95. The 10-12 oz. Prime rib or fried shrimp run \$21.95, with a petit filet mignon at \$24.95.

We resisted homemade pie or ice cream pie at \$4.50, but an after-dinner grasshopper for \$6 went down easily as we sat at the bar looking out on the yachts, wondering if the rich folks were any happier.

Dinner 5-10 p.m. May 1- mid October. Reservations for parties 10 or more. Phone-231-625-2919. The restaurant is on the Cheboygan River near the junction of M -27 and M -33 at 8131 Beebe Road. Another way to get here: Leave I-75 at Topinabee-Cheboygan River exit and drive 17 mile on M -27.

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