

## Five Crowns: An English delight in Corona del Mar

### Dining San Diego

By David Rottenberg

"I'd walk a mile for a Camel." That was a popular marketing slogan when I was in college. Now that I'm older (and don't smoke anymore), I've paraphrased that to "I'd drive 'X' miles for a good meal." The distance depends on the quality of experience that I anticipate. Recently, I drove 70 miles — to the Five Crowns in Corona del Mar.

Five Crowns resembles an old English country inn. It is a large, white house, with exposed beams on the interior and exterior. Wood is everywhere. So are glowing fireplaces. The interior's lower floor has several rooms for dining and a large bar area. It feels like Shakespeare could have dined here.

Bright, beautiful flowers surround the walkway to the main entrance like an English garden. A large valet parking lot across the street accommodates guests.

Service is attentive and quick. A sommelier, dressed formally in a tuxedo-like outfit, pours the wine generously. "Wenches" in fetching period costumes are friendly servers. Dishes are cleared by busboys dressed in "livery" costume.

The effect is to mentally transport diners to another time and place. The dishes listed on the menu — roast duckling, prime rib and salmon — reinforce the ambiance of the setting.

Corona del Mar is a community that lies just south of Newport Beach. Even during rush hour traffic, it is easy to reach the restaurant using the toll road.

1936 and has been a favorite for decades. It was acquired in 1965 by the Lawry's chain — which operates incredible restaurants and markets a line of spices through supermarkets. Lawry's is renowned for its quality of food and service in unique restaurant settings.

The executive chef at Five Crowns is Dennis Brask.

Brask fell in love with culinary activities when he worked his way through college in Minnesota by cooking for a local hospital. He originally studied engineering, but turned his attention to the stove and food preparation. He enjoyed a stint working as a chef at Hugh Hefner's Playboy Club and at numerous boutique hotels under the tutelage of European chefs. He became executive chef at Five Crowns in 1984 and has kept at it since, except for a brief period when he ran the prestigious Summit House and did private consulting.

The menu lists old favorites as well as seasonal variations. Brask believes in remaining true to traditions, but develops new dishes to reflect what is fresh and running. Roast prime rib is available in four sizes, depending on the appetite, and is served with traditional Yorkshire pudding. Roast duckling — a "full" half — is served on a bed of apples and prunes compote. Rack of lamb and veal rib chop make Five Crowns a carnivore's paradise. Seafood includes potato-crusting salmon, grilled swordfish and halibut.

Appetizers include a classic shrimp cocktail and wonderful, plump Maryland crab cakes. The tasty Pride of the Crowns salad combines several lettuces with



A glimpse inside Five Crowns restaurant in Corona del Mar.

Our dinner began with prosciutto and fruit, a remarkable appetizer that melded melon, duck, prosciutto and a warm fig filled with blue cheese. This was followed by Jewel Salad, a mix of spinach, romaine and almonds. The salad was dotted with pomegranate seeds that burst with flavor.

Our entrees were oak smoked beef tenderloin and Alaskan halibut. The beef was smoked with cedar the day before, making it incredibly flavorful and tender. A mushroom bread pudding was a wonderful alternative to the standard Yorkshire pudding.

Five Crowns is an easy drive from San Diego and well worth the effort. Prices are moderate to expensive, in keeping with the quality.

Five Crowns is located at 3801



Dennis Brask

Mar. Call (949) 760-0331 for reservations and information.

Rottenberg is editor of Dining San Diego Magazine and member of the California Restaurant Writers Association.

Source Code: 20041118thg