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## Dining Review: The Dogwood

The Dogwood returns with renewed vigor.

By Suzanne Loudermilk

### THE DOGWOOD

**STYLE:** Neighborhood casual with a hint of romance.

**CUISINE:** Sustainable American dishes with a reliance on local and organic sourcing.

**YOU'LL FIND:** A solicitous staff and owners serving some of the most creative food in town.



CREDIT: VINCE LUPO  
Sophie Belz in the dining room

Chef Galen Sampson is back—and better than ever. But his future wasn't so certain last year when The Dogwood closed, at first, for the dog days of August, then, for several months after. Diners feared that Sampson, who owns the Hampden restaurant with his wife Bridget, would not be reopening his culinary vision to offer diners local, seasonal fare and to serve as an in-house training ground for local, disadvantaged workers.

Whatever the reason for the hiatus (some say it was financial), Sampson is once again showcasing his cooking talents and carrying on his social mission on a smaller scale. The menu is varied and flavor-packed with vegetarian and organic options. You can just feel the chef's excitement and energy in one dish after another.

Much of the interior is the same. Tiny strands of lights and giant lighted stars overhead still create a dreamy state in the darkened dining room and bar. The biggest difference is the colorful mural of dogwoods that adds an almost Asian touch to the space.

If we had one complaint, it's that the bare tables are too close together. We felt like we had to suck in our guts to get to our chairs—and that was before dinner. But the atmosphere is bohemian romantic. You forget that you're in a below-street-level restaurant.

You can also enter Dogwood from the back alley, where free parking is available—a welcome amenity in the busy neighborhood. And that's exactly what we did. A pleasant hostess quickly led us to our table to begin one of the most memorable meals we've had in a long time.

We've always loved the freshly baked Irish soda bread and sweet mango butter. And it's still your first food introduction to Dogwood. We could honestly live by this bread alone!

But then we wouldn't have had a chance to sample our array of appetizers—palate pleasers, every one. The baked oysters were warm, plump, and juicy specimens from the Chesapeake and were made even more stunning with crabmeat, spinach, fennel, Parmesan, and a Herbsaint-laced mustard sauce. The anise liquor is a great foil for the sweet seafood.

From the list of small plates, our eyes went to the organic beets (from Pennsylvania). The dish was a visual and gastronomic treat. Chiogga beets (also called candy-cane beets for their red-and-white markings), pickled gold beets, and musky red beets, all sliced or cubed in various sizes, were artfully arranged on the plate. It was further gussied up with a handful of frisée and a crostini chip with creamy blue cheese. The dish merits a "wow."


We also dug into a cornmeal-crusted eggplant strata. "Small" plate is a misnomer in this instance. It's meal size. Slices of potatoes and eggplant were layered with a garlicky tomato coulis and olive tapenade for a rustic interpretation.

The mango chicken profiteroles were an adorable amuse-bouche. Two teeny, airy pastry puffs were stuffed with dollops of chicken salad with a tinge of curry. It got an edginess from an intriguing raisin-yogurt chutney dressing mixed with the organic chicken.

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By this time, we had no doubt that our entrees would be stellar. And we were right. Pan-seared Maryland rockfish was a white square of freshness with deliciously uncharacteristic sides— andouille hash (a dice of smoky sausage with potatoes) and a pool of Laughing Bird shrimp (raised off the coast of Belize) remoulade—and adornments like tomatillo jam and Herbsaint cream.

Each dish seemed more inventive than the next. It was almost like the chef was in the kitchen trying to outdo himself. And succeeding.

The bacon-roasted pork tenderloin (from a lovingly nurtured Duroc hog) was a half-foot log of tender meat surrounded by red beans; a firm, coarse-grain wheat-berry pilaf; and broccolini, julienne carrots, and cauliflower.

A rainbow trout fillet hid a surprise sweet-potato mash underneath that complimented the fish smothered with a tangle of sautéed shiitake mushrooms. And the ancho-braised beef short ribs were everything you would hope for—succulent and meaty in a spicy barbecue sauce. The accompanying green chile cornbread was like a savory bread pudding and didn't shy away from the zing of peppers to stand up to the hearty flavors of the short ribs.

While we were oohing and aahing over the food, we also were impressed with the smooth removal and delivery of plates and cutlery. It was a successful team effort.

The only quibble came at the end when our main server didn't offer us coffee with our desserts. It was probably an oversight, but we lost his attention after the sweets showed up, which were brought by other people.

But we were soon happily engrossed in a soothing maple crème brûlée, a dense chocolate pot de crème with fresh whipped cream, and a fluffy orange-scented cheesecake with lively flecks of citrus.

Our favorite, though, was the "elegant" fresh apple tart with a crispy butter crust. The pastry came with ice cream, as did several desserts, though it wasn't the usual vanilla. But, hey, we were at The Dogwood, where culinary chances are taken. By now, we should have known to expect the unexpected. The delicate apple tart came with a hearty chocolate ice cream by Baltimore's Taharka Brothers. The pairing was perfect.

Bridget Sampson is a self-taught baker and leads the restaurant's pastry program. We credit her with such a satisfying end to our meal.

Dogwood also has midweek specials for \$17. For instance, you might find cioppino on Wednesdays or buttermilk fried chicken on Thursdays. There is also casual fare like burgers, daily pasta, and salads with salmon or chicken.

We think chef Sampson has come up with the right formula for his restaurant. We predict that this new, energized reincarnation will be around for the long haul.

The Dogwood, 911 W. 36th St., 410-889-0952. Hours: 5-10 p.m. Tues.-Thurs., 5-11 p.m. Fri.-Sat. Appetizers, \$4-\$16; entrees, \$18-32; desserts, \$6-7.

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