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Dining Review: The Dogwood Restaurant

A dedicated chef strives for inspired cuisine, local flavors.

By Bianca Sienna



THE DOGWOOD RESTAURANT STYLE Intimate neighborhood café with a casual feel and sophisticated cuisine.

CUISINE New American preparations featuring local, organically raised produce and meats.

YOU'LL FIND A place whose commitment to local folks and flavors—as well as its oft-times stunningly fine food—outweighs a multitude of minor sins.

The history of The Dogwood—deli, restaurant, institute—is brief but already dizzying in its various permutations. It began as a Hampden takeout in the summer of 2006, where its lovingly fresh, gourmet take on everything from sandwiches to smoothies made it an instant neighborhood hit. But Galen Sampson and his wife Bridget—he's the former executive chef of four-star Hampton's at the Harbor Court—had always planned on opening a real restaurant, and in early 2007, Dogwood began serving simple dinners in a tiny dining room beneath the deli.

Later that spring, the dining room and the menu expanded, and Dogwood officially became a full-fledged restaurant, albeit sans liquor license, garnering solid reviews from the local press. But just as I was about to embark on a full review of the place this summer, Dogwood suddenly closed to complete renovations on its still-cramped dining rooms. Although the deli reassuringly remained open for business, my first thought was a definite “uh-oh.” It's never a good sign when new restaurants close within weeks of opening, no matter what the ostensible reason, and I was frankly skeptical when Sampson announced that Dogwood would re-open in early fall.

But re-open it did, and as of this writing, even the long-awaited liquor license has arrived. It's a relief to report that one of Baltimore's noblest endeavors now seems to be thriving, despite its bumpy start and despite some rough edges that need smoothing.

It's difficult not to root for this plucky enterprise, which is devoted to utilizing the product of local farmers whenever possible, and which hosts the Dogwood Gourmet Institute, a nonprofit culinary school dedicated to providing free training for recovering addicts, the homeless, and the formerly incarcerated. The trainees work in the restaurant; the restaurant's revenues fund the training.

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In keeping with that ethic, the whole endeavor has a handmade air about it—the staff is sweet and hardworking, the best food here is relatively fuss-free, the décor is obviously the result of having to make something out of nothing, or at least not much. The space was originally Mamie’s Café, a long, low-ceilinged cave stuffed with claustrophobia-inducing bric-a-brac.

The completed renovation has opened up the space, and save for an unfortunate placing of the hostess stand in the middle of kitchen traffic, Dogwood now looks very pretty and spacious, if not especially posh.

But posh would frankly feel weird; that’s not the point. The point is to create a model of successful social enterprise that offers something Baltimore sorely needs: fresh local cuisine, creatively prepared. In its latest incarnation, Dogwood needs to work on consistency issues before it can be deemed a total success, but if Sampson manages to solve those problems, his shop will thrive.

On our first post-renovation visit, Senor M and I and three friends found the place hopping on a Saturday night. Everything from service to food was near perfect.

That night, we marveled over M’s starter of handmade pumpkin gnocchi, cloud soft and nestled in an autumnal ring of wild mushrooms, sage pesto, and fontina. That was the hit of the night, but other small plates were nearly as good, featuring ingredients that were at the peak of flavor. A tender mound of grilled calamari graced a simple salad of gorgeous heirloom tomatoes and Asian greens. My delicate plate of fat, poached shrimp got its local kick from sweet corn-crab pudding and smoky bacon confit.

Entrees were uniformly lovely: one friend’s garlic-infused wheat berry risotto in a maple-roasted dumpling squash was an object lesson in the joys of vegetarian cuisine, while another’s pepper-grilled teres major steak was a prime, earthy lesson in the proper way to cook beef. My pan-roasted grouper was simple and good—just the sweet fish and a bit of red-wine reduction, paired with a toothsome side of basmati rice and pumpkin pirlau. M’s locally bred pork tenderloin was equally simple. Bacon wrapped and bathed in fresh cider jus, the full flavor of the meat was rightly the center of attention. By the time we got to dessert—shared plates of smooth orange-basil crème brulee and brandied chocolate pot de crème—we were sure we’d found nirvana.

And yet our next visit, only a week later, was close to disastrous. That same pumpkin gnocchi was overwhelmed by a too-liberal application of the sage pesto. The pure, clean taste of Chesapeake oysters got lost beneath a mass of over-salted spinach, bacon, crab and Parmesan. My Columbia River sturgeon steak was bland and mushy, and curiously paired with dry cornbread stuffing. Even the vegetable du jour—stalks of local broccoli—was overcooked and yellow. More troublesome, however, was the kitchen snafu that kept three of us waiting while our companion’s food failed to appear with the rest of the order.

The staff was seriously in the weeds that night—another Saturday, another big crowd like the one they’d handled a week ago with easy aplomb, but for some reason, everything went amiss. At the end of the evening, Galen Sampson emerged from the kitchen looking anxious, exhausted, and spent, like a prizefighter after 15 rounds. It’s a tribute to the way we feel about his spirit and his admirable enterprise that we felt not the least bit angry—just sorry the night had gone wrong.

Plus, out of half a dozen previous meals, Sampson’s food had never failed us. And so we went back again, on a weeknight, just M and I. This time, all was right. The pan-roasted duck breast was rich and rare; the pork porterhouse steak couldn’t have been more succulent. We even tried the gnocchi, yet again, and found it as memorably delightful as that first taste.

A week later, a food-loving friend excitedly told me that he and his wife had finally tried Dogwood and had fallen in love with it. “How was the service?” I queried. “Well, we had to wait a bit for Susan’s entree; they seemed a little overwhelmed in the kitchen.” Regardless, he was eager to go back, and so are we.

Here’s what I figure: Liquor license equals more revenue equals more hires —with luck, a practiced set of hands in the kitchen. We want the next chapter of this story to have a happy ending.

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