

SOMETHING'S FLOWERING AT DOGWOOD ; RESTAURANT REVIEW

[FINAL Edition]

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Document Text

Food *** (3 stars)

Service *** (3 stars)

Atmosphere **1/2 (2 1/2stars)

Galen Sampson and his wife, Bridget, have been much written about lately for their eco-consciousness and good deeds - their new deli/ restaurant supports local and organic farms and gives jobs to recovering addicts and convicts. It's impressive stuff, but what most of us really want to know about Dogwood is pretty simple.

Is the food good?

How does Hampton's, Harbor Court's now-defunct palace de cuisine where Sampson was chef, translate to Hampden?

I'm not talking about the Dog wood deli, which opened first and was reviewed by Karen Nit kin, our other reviewer, in The Sun's Live section, but the down stairs restaurant, where you can get upscale food in fairly down scale surroundings.

Don't misunderstand me. The basement dining room is pleasant enough, but Hampden somehow seeps through the very walls. So in spite of the Sampsons' hard work redecorating the place, in spite of the white table cloths and candlelight, this still feels like a casual, folksy eating spot. The wait staff wear jeans. And while a wine bar is in the planning stages, right now you have to bring your own bottle.

All this would be more of a problem if Dogwood were trying to be more than it is: a neighborhood restaurant that specializes in well-cooked meals using seasonal ingredients and sophisticated techniques. The deli menu is always available in the main dining room, while the dinner offerings change daily.

Usually there are about four appetizers and seven entrees (a few more on the weekend). If you've ever bought expensive ingredients from organic farms at the farmers' market, you know Dogwood's prices are reasonable for what you get.

Because Chef Sampson is relying so heavily on local ingredients, it's not surprising that the offerings take off from local recipes, even though they have global accents. When an ingredient isn't local, its provenance is listed almost apologetically, like the Maine scallops. (Which goes to prove that local isn't always best. The scallops were wonderful.)

The Maryland-style crab soup, almost a tomato puree with big lumps of crab and fresh vegetables seasoned with Old Bay, is a fine soup; but it doesn't exactly show the range of Sampson's talents in the kitchen. The wild rockfish fillet, thick and fresh, does. Its citrusy butter sauce has notes of fresh basil, and it even overshadows the fine lump crab cake at its side. Too bad the roasted sweet potatoes don't have more of a presence on the plate.

The Chesapeake was also represented by four grilled oysters, their fat salty-sweetness balanced with fresh sauteed spinach, bacon from a local farm and subtle accents of goat cheese and mustard. Just as good were the perfectly seared scallops nestled on a bed of lettuces (not the promised arugula). Under tones of ginger and orange gave the vinaigrette dressing a faintly Asian flavor.

Sampson also combines slices of apple, grated smoked gouda cheese and walnuts on a spring mix - pleasant, but not as enticing as the scallop salad.

Dishes here are meant to please, not shock, so a trendy cut of beef like the teres major tender (from the shoulder) is explained as "the second most tender cut" and served in rosy pink slices with a rich wine and mushroom sauce. Cheese grits and local broccoli come with it. Be warned that the pork tender loin wrapped in bacon arrives even more rare than the beef unless you request otherwise, but it's mighty good as is.

The daily dinner menu includes one vegetarian dish, such as risotto with artichokes, spring peas and sweet peppers. A Spanish-inspired pasta featured shrimp and more of those good scallops. They stood up just fine to the fruity kalamata olives, salty capers and garlicky green sauce.

Baked goods are homey at Dogwood. Dinner, for instance, comes with brown Irish soda bread. (I would lose the accompanying raspberry butter and apple butter in favor of something not sweet.) For desserts there's an excellent banana-walnut cake and chocolate chip pound cake. But sometimes the kitchen's more high-end leanings show through, as with the lemon creme brulee, profiteroles and artisan cheese plate to end the meal.

Come to think of it, that's pretty typical of the whole experience at Dogwood, which makes it a very nice place to be eating a meal.

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Dogwood

Address:

911 W. 36th St., Hampden

Hours:

Open Monday-Saturday for lunch and dinner and Sunday for brunch

Prices:

Appetizers, \$5.50-\$11.75; entrees, \$13.75-\$21.50

Call:

410-889-0952

[Outstanding:

star

star

star

star Good:

star

star

star Fair or Uneven:

star

star Poor:

star]

Credit: Sun Restaurant Critic

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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