

# In Daryl Veritas

*by Stan Parish*

January 23, 2008

David Drake has come a few blocks shy of full circle. He made his name almost 25 years ago at the Frog and the Peach in New Brunswick. After stints in several distinguished kitchens, he launched a place of his own in 2005, the highly regarded Restaurant David Drake in Rahway. Last September he returned to New Brunswick as executive chef of Daryl Restaurant and Wine Bar, just a five-minute stroll from where his career took off.

“The concept is small plates,” says Drake. “But more to the point, it’s sharing.” Right at the top, the menu announces that “rather than offering individual appetizers and main courses, Daryl Wine Bar serves dishes to be shared and brought to the table steadily throughout the meal.” There are 22 small plates, hot as well as cold, which are also available in larger portions. Then there are eight entrée-size Chef’s Signature Dishes. You can order traditionally, but it’s more fun to surf the small plates for the spectrum of delights they offer.

Sharing is another matter. What do you do, for example, when three exemplary croquettes of brandade, the provincial French dish of whipped potatoes and salt cod, arrive at your table of four? They’re served on a thick squiggle of red piquillo pepper sauce, which adds the perfect touch of sweetness and heat. You won’t want anyone to miss the creamy, salty richness inside the crisp shells, but you also won’t want to divvy them up.

Daryl stems from a 2006 demonstration Drake gave at the Kings Supermarket Cooking Studio in Short Hills. Afterwards, a woman in the class, Daryl Sorrentini, expressed admiration for his food and mentioned that her father’s real estate firm, Wick Companies LLC, had an attractive space available for a restaurant. The space runs along George Street in New Brunswick in the same building as the Heldrich Hotel.

Drake teamed up with Lee Chasalow (his GM and sommelier when he was at the Stage House in Scotch Plains) and went back to Daryl and her brother-in-law, Bob Paulus (president of Wick), with a proposal that would make them partners in the venture. They accepted and brought ideas of their own, like the in-house wine store stocked with sommelier Chasalow’s intriguing selections. They also brought in Riscala Restaurant Designers, who outfitted the space with dark walnut floors offset by pillars of white Italian tile, and a row of glass-topped tables that runs the length of the restaurant, flanked by tall white leather chairs. Drake and Chasalow, who also worked together as cooks at the River Café in Brooklyn under David Burke, are the operating partners.

The croquettes are a family recipe from chef de cuisine Juan Carlos Fernandez, a native of Seville. His knowledge of Spanish cuisine is “encyclopedic,” says his boss, and it makes the perfect complement to Drake’s decidedly French touch.

The small plates pack some big pleasures. Crisp spears of asparagus are bundled with serrano ham and sweetened by a dusting of chopped hazelnuts and an ethereal hazelnut froth. A sweet long pepper is stuffed with braised short ribs and finished with diced roasted eggplant. Humble Italian white polenta wears a haute hat—shaved black truffles and a sprinkling of chives. The preparation of the slow-cooked duck egg changes nightly, so you can only hope for the version that included bacon, wilted spinach, and a rich mushroom sauce topped with crisp fried onions. The misses are few. Under a bland cap of Emmenthal Swiss, onion soup for two was too salty.

Among the Chef’s Signature Dishes, flawless scallops with slivers of preserved lemon were served on almost woven layers of bitter greens and baby fennel. The intoxicating richness of a sliced flatiron steak on spaetzle and sautéed wild mushrooms was aptly balanced by a cool parsley purée prettily daubed on the plate.

At times, presentation seemed to trump flavor. The color contrast between wild salmon and black squid-ink risotto was striking, but the flavors didn’t mesh well.

Behind the bar, and also in the retail store, which is opposite the dining room, an Enomatic wine system preserves and stabilizes open bottles with an infusion of argon gas, and dispenses precise 2-, 4-, and 6-ounce pours. In the store, patrons can buy wine debit cards which they insert into any of the 24 Enomatic dispensers to try a wine before they spring for a bottle.

The cocktail menu includes such delights as a pear sidecar, its sweetness checked by a touch of lemon juice. Consider a cocktail for dessert, or perhaps the selection of artisanal cheeses. The sweets themselves were mostly unremarkable. A pretentious creamsicle of orange sherbet and vanilla ice cream was more prosaic than the real thing; the kitschy “P, B, and J” with peanut butter mousse and raspberry thyme gelée was cloying. The chef’s selection of sorbets, however, made a perfect palate-cleansing finale, like the last float in a long, vibrant parade.