

A Masterful Touch As a Chef Branches Out

by Karla Cook

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DAVID DRAKE, both the brains and the brawn behind the impeccable restaurant bearing his name in Rahway, has done it again with Daryl Wine Bar and Restaurant in downtown New Brunswick, which opened in October.

We should reward him and his three partners — one of whom, Daryl Sorrentini, lends her first name to this venture — with our business, but we will be rewarded as well: We will eat, drink and most likely be merry, because the food is so delicious and the experience so joyful.

First, the décor, which shows delicious attention to detail, with high ceilings, dark wooden floors and oversize doors. White honeycombed trelliswork behind the bar plays softly against the beautiful row of 32 glass-fronted bays holding a remarkable collection of wines available by the glass, and even better, by the taste.

Service was professional and anticipatory. Plates were removed when they were empty, and on two visits — one on a busy Saturday night, and the other a very quiet weekday lunch — that happened quickly.

The food went fast partly because it is served in small portions — figure on two small plates a person for each course — and is meant to be shared. But it also was devoured because the ingredients were remarkably fresh, the dishes were well conceived and the preparation was masterful.

Memorable cold plates included scallop and snapper ceviche, its soft sweetness tempered by a marinade of bitter orange; a sublime house salad with the correct proportions of greens to sherry vinaigrette and only the pulp of tiny tomatoes, with its surprising resemblance to roe; and duck confit, luscious bits of fowl over beets and greens, the surprise of a horseradish dressing and bits of duck cracklings.

Too bad the kitchen was out of its parsnip and roasted pear soup on the cold and dreary afternoon I wanted it. But I settled, if you can call it that, for other hot dishes. One was a thick and creamy mushroom soup balanced with vincotto (a sweet, dark vinegar from Apulia, in southeastern Italy). Another was a trio of beautiful and delicately airy croquettes of brandade (salt cod) and a bit too little of the piquillo pepper sauce that would have diffused my concentration on the high salt content of this traditional ingredient

I further consoled myself with a thin-crust pizza that transcended a quick weekday meal with the addition of caramelized onions and piquillo pepper and with Mahón in place of mozzarella.

Then there's the mini-burger, which now supplants my former image of a bacon cheeseburger, with thick-sliced Neuske bacon, redolent aged cheddar, and grass- and alfalfa-fed beef ground from short ribs, flatiron and chuck. A serving of two, with a salad, is just enough for a meal, but they are so delicious, it would be selfish not to share.

On another visit, there was a feast of tender baby squid classically paired with chickpeas, baby greens and a frisky lemon vinaigrette; a cauliflower gratin with coriander and saffron; meat empanadas, their crisp pastries hiding the succulence within; polenta that exuded seductive aromas of black truffle on each trip from bowl to mouth.

Among the "chef's signature dishes," the treats went on: a bouillabaisse against which I now judge all versions; tender roasted sweetbreads with a celeriac purée and a smidgen of apple cider sauce; a pan-roasted slab of barramundi with a sprinkling of spinach gnocchi, braised leeks and sweet baby turnips.

Desserts, though impeccably executed, are generally less interesting, except for one. It's a tiny tart that begins with an exceedingly fresh dark chocolate cookie-like crust, layered with chocolate ganache. That, in turn, is topped with caramel, with a few grains of fleur de sel for garnish.

Mr. Drake says he has at least two more projects in mind: something in Asbury Park, and/or a burger joint in New Brunswick. Wherever, whatever, I'm there.

THE RATING: EXCELLENT

THE SPACE: Beautiful, with cool, dark stone tables and elegant table settings. Complete wheelchair access.

THE CROWD: Exuberant and celebratory; professional and anticipatory servers; no children seen.

THE BAR: Excellent and wide-ranging list of more than 60 wines available by glasses of 2 ounces (\$2 to \$19), 4 ounces (\$4 to \$38) or 6 ounces (\$6 to \$57); 32 half-bottles, \$24 to \$112; 530 bottles, \$29 to \$2,250.

THE BILL: Lunch dishes (sandwiches and small plates), \$5 to \$17. At dinner, small plates are \$4 to \$27. All major cards accepted.

WHAT WE LIKE Ceviche, house salad, duck confit over greens, squid and chickpeas, mushroom soup, brandade croquettes, cauliflower with coriander and saffron, empanadas, thin-crust pizza, polenta and black truffle, barramundi with gnocchi, roasted sweetbreads, bouillabaisse, bacon cheeseburgers, chocolate ganache tart with salted caramel.