

Daryl Wine Bar and Restaurant

Precise orchestration results in an interactive food and wine experience within a classy contemporary setting that brings a little Manhattan into New Brunswick.

By Antoinette Buckley

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DARYL Wine Bar is the perfect package, all wrapped up and tied with the finest ribbon. As with any special gift, the element of surprise lures you, the content is exquisite, and the after-effect is unforgettable. The restaurant was conceived almost two years ago when silent partners Robert Paulus and Daryl Sorrentini (the woman after whom the restaurant is named) approached Chef David Drake with a seed of an idea.

Executive chef-owner David Drake is regarded as one of the best chefs in New Jersey. He is a self-taught chef who learned his craft through perseverance, hard work, precision, and an innate talent that was aroused from slumber during his late teens in the midst of a frenetic restaurant kitchen. Throughout his extensive career he has proven himself again and again in big name New Jersey kitchens such as The Ryland Inn and the Frog and the Peach, not to mention major establishments in New York and Philadelphia.

Those at the top of their field tend to surround themselves with the most talented and competent people. And so enters Lee Chasalow, Mr. Drake's friend and colleague. Mr. Chasalow has been in the business for more than 26 years, working in the kitchen and the front of the house. His experience is derived mostly from noted establishments in New York like the River Cafe and The French Culinary Institute where he taught. He holds the title of sommelier and is adept at creating a quality dining experience, which includes graceful service among so many other more subtle details.

Mr. Drake and Mr. Chasalow collaboratively run the show while Chef de Cuisine Juan Carlos Fernandez powers the kitchen.

Daryl Wine Bar, open for just seven months, is Mr. Drake's second restaurant currently in operation. The first is the prestigious Restaurant David Drake in Rahway. While the two are quite different from one another, Mr. Drake has again created a menu expressing clear, amiable flavors that ring true amid poetic license. With this latest endeavor, it's as if Mr. Drake has bottled up all his experience, his impeccable taste, his talent and poured it into Daryl Wine Bar.

The restaurant is founded on three unifying principles: food, wine and sharing. Daryl's has embraced the small-plate trend that has set the expansive variety of wines and foods in motion for the average diner. Here, artful food is served in smaller portions (typically larger than an appetizer and smaller than an entree). Each plate on the menu is notated with a wine pairing suggestion that Mr. Chasalow has thoughtfully chosen. His choices reveal his fine-tuned senses and lead you to a path of discovery about the interplay of food and wine on the individual palette.

A state-of-the-art preservation system allows the restaurant to offer about 60 wines by the glass. Each can be ordered in a 2 oz., 4 oz. or 6 oz. pour, which is ideal for the intent of trying a variety of food and wine. While small plates can be ordered exclusively for the duration of the evening, the option to order a traditional entree (referred to as “chef’s signature dishes” on the menu) is available as well. If the first option is chosen, a couple of plates come to the table at once, followed by another round and so on. Most dishes are conducive to sharing between two people and sometimes three.

The result of such precise orchestration is an interactive experience with food, wine and those who share your table. This all happens within a classy, contemporary setting that brings a little Manhattan into New Brunswick. The decorating is sleek and stylish. Place settings are done in varying shapes of white. White serving bowls and soup bowls are purposely shaped slightly off kilter for that different effect. The flatware is substantial and the knives are unique. Everything about this restaurant is deliberate right down to the way the server sets down a white rectangular plate in front of you, carefully positioning each new set of flatware with every course.

All this, and the food is magical too. Wild mushroom soup (\$7) comes on a tray. Two small soup bowls filled with wild mushrooms are on either end of the tray. The “broth” is set between the two in a bottle. Once you assemble your soup and take your first bite, you realize what soup must be like in heaven. The multiple textures and intense flavor of earth, herb and wine make a smashing start to this meal that will merrily roll along as long as you let it. The pairing of a 2005 Julienas from Pascal Granger in Beaujolais, France, is an ideal match for the soup. This well-made Beaujolais is fruit-forward with a nice complexity that flirts with hints of meadow. It is earthy enough to underscore that same element in the soup, but bright enough to offset the weight of it.

The gnudis (\$10) are yet another transcendent experience. They are fluffy balls made from a mixture of ricotta cheese and flour. These melt-in-your-mouth mini cushions bathe in a creamy lobster sauce and are crowned with crispy shreds of shallots. The German white wine it is paired with, Muller-Thurgau Flaneur 2005, lends buoyancy to this dish, as it is crisp and refreshing with an exotic edge.

Coming back down to earth has never been sweeter than with a taste of the sweet long pepper (\$8) stuffed with short ribs and eggplant. This plate is more grounded than some of the others and still lovely.

What once was peasant food is now the high-end restaurant’s answer to comfort food. Daryl’s white Italian polenta (\$9) is texturally sound and wildly good, infused with flavors of rosemary and a pignoli nut puree. It is paired with an engaging 2005 Zierfandler from Austria that has a beautiful nose with hints of green melon and lime; a fine pairing with a simple, buttery dish that can benefit from a bit more complexity in the wine.

There is so much to explore under the “small plate” umbrella. Next time I’ll opt to fill my entire meal with them, as the choices are most compelling. For those who choose a more traditional path as we did on our first visit, entrees are well presented and also top-notch. The wild king salmon (\$24) is cooked expertly. It is embellished with a light roasted red pepper broth that morphs into a new sauce once the toothsome, squid ink risotto that sits alongside releases its black color (and flavor) into it.

The flat-iron steak (\$24) also flaunts excellent technique with a seared outside and beautiful red color inside. The complements to this dish are wild mushrooms coated in gravy, spaetzle and a vibrant parsley purée. This plate needs a big wine with a long finish and so it is appropriately paired with a 2005 Cabernet Sauvignon from Argentina.

Like the rest of the menu, dessert is unpretentious in an elevated kind of way. The creamsicle (\$7) and the P, B, and J (\$9) give you a little taste of that. Daryl’s does show a flaw (if you can call it that) with the chocolate tasting (\$8). It includes mini portions of a brilliant white chocolate mousse, a puzzling mocha shot, a sweeter-than-sweet caramel tart and an average flourless cake. It just isn’t all that your mind wishes a chocolate tasting to be. Your dreams are back on track, however, with the baked apple spring rolls (\$8), in which chopped apples are wrapped in a cinnamon sugar pastry. The apples are the perfect consistency between crispy and soft and the pastry is marvelous. It is served with refreshing lemon ice cream and a tart bed of fruit.

Daryl’s is a breath of fresh air. David Drake and Lee Chasalow are a dynamic team that has set this restaurant on a smart path. The food and wine dance together effortlessly within the atmosphere of a shared experience. More importantly, the business operates in an environmentally conscious way and makes a strong commitment to local producers. Daryl’s Wine Bar is convivial as it warmly welcomes you to discover and share the passions of its owners.