

David Drake serves up winner in New Brunswick

by Cody Kendall

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Did you ever go to a restaurant where you wanted to order everything on the menu? Alas, limits to the appetite and budget generally preclude acting on such a sweeping whim. At Daryl, however, it's possible to indulge that impulse to a pretty fair extent, depending on the number of dining partners who accompany you.

Many small plates are offered at this exciting attraction that opened last month on the lively New Brunswick restaurant scene, where it is helmed by New Jersey celebrity chef David Drake. The options for mix-and-match sampling range from \$4 to \$20. The idea is to have a little of this and a little of that, sharing with your table mates

Think of tapas with a graduate degree. You could start with ceviche (\$12), a tapas staple, though this one involving scallops and snapper is done in more of a confetti style, with small pieces accented by a bitter orange marmalade for a defining touch. Then it's on to a fabulous parsnip and Granny Smith apple soup (\$8), served with two bowls (that sharing concept) and spiked by a swirl of Calvados for a robust treat to warm up a cold autumn night. From there, you might go with the spinach gnocchi masterpiece (\$7), enhanced by braised leeks and baby turnips, or a marvelous coriander and saffron-scented cauliflower gratin casserole (\$4), which will seduce even those who normally eschew this hunky white vegetable.

Want more? Of course you do. There are the crisp-jacketed meat empanadas (\$7); an artfully arranged, slightly (but deliberately) under-cooked plate of baby squid (\$9) with chick peas and greens in a lemon vinaigrette, and the texture/flavor/color-contrasting white polenta with shaved black truffle (\$12).

Another dozen or so choices are available, but you won't want to ignore the menu's next page, "dinner specialties," which in a regular restaurant would be called entrees.

These are larger portions at higher prices, though some, like the beer-braised short ribs (\$24) are divided and served in a way that encourages more sharing. There's a nice hunk of wild king salmon (\$25) with steamed asparagus and lemon/thyme butter; simple but effective. Ditto the roasted organic chicken breast (\$19) with a pepper thyme jus. Roasted sweetbreads (\$22) with root vegetable confiture and celeriac puree, dressed with an apple cider sauce, ramp things up a notch.

If you're in a more down-to-earth mood, however, try the pair of mini-burgers (\$5), with cheese, tomato and house-made ketchup on rough-textured bread. And speaking of bread, we enjoyed the breadsticks (they ran out when we asked for seconds), onion loaf slices and jalapeno corn muffins that came at the start of the meal and were made on the premises.

The chef de cuisine is Juan Carlo Fernandez, a graduate of the French Culinary Institute who previously was at Restaurant Nicholas in Middletown and also worked at Restaurant David Drake in Rahway. Drake is spending time in both his restaurants at present. Desserts are by Derek Chervenak, who does the end-of-the-meal honors in Rahway as well.

The sweet “compositions” (\$8) are more like traditional desserts, though presented in grand style. The chocolate Napoleon would be renamed Chocolate Bliss, were I writing the menu. It’s a perfect blend of devil’s food cake, interspersed with passion fruit coulis and chocolate mousse, done in such a way that the chocolate soothes rather than overwhelms.

I’ll admit it -- I’m generally not a pumpkin fan. But the pumpkin creme brulee in the Taste of Autumn sampler had me nearly swooning, it was so creamy and light, with just a hint of pumpkin. Other elements of the autumn taste included a praline mousse on a thin maple leaf cookie, and a tiny pecan pie; again, think feathery rather than heavy.

Frozen desserts are \$7 and include a “chocolate malt” of malt ice cream with a chocolate sorbet crown. There’s an orange creamsicle and a variety of ice creams and sorbets. My advice is to skip the Margarita sorbet. It incorporates salt and just doesn’t work in the same neat way as a salt-rimmed frozen Margarita in a glass. Other choices include a citrus ginger sorbet (just the thing to refresh) and peanut butter ice cream.

The wine is, of course, a key component of the Daryl formula. The restaurant is named after Daryl Sorrentini, one of the partners in the business with Lee Chasalow, Bob Paulus and Drake. According to manager Warren Zinn, she came up with the idea for a wine bar after visiting one in California.

There are 500 wines available, and 65 by the glass. Pours are two ounces, four ounces and six ounces, so you can organize your own tasting. I found that three, two-ounce tastings satisfied me more than six ounces of the same wine.

In the adjacent wine shop, your favorite bottles are available for purchase. You’ll also find an Enomatic wine preservation and serving system, so you can pour your own wine, if you wish, though a staffer is also available to do it for you. Simply buy a card that slips into the machine, which then dispenses whatever you select in the proper amount. I didn’t have time to try it, but it looked very cool.

So is the decor, from the crystal quartz bar to the color scheme incorporating browns, tans, yellows, red and blues, into which the staffers’ charcoal jackets melt unobtrusively. The seating varies; there are couches in one area, comfy benches in another, and white, high-backed chairs that reminded me of mini-thrones along a glass-topped, family-style table that permitted plenty of separation among the parties seated there.

Everything about this informal, yet stylish, type of dining suits me perfectly. When I eat on my own and am not reviewing, I often order two or three appetizers and skip an entree, because I prefer to taste a few different things and may not be in the mood for anything heavy to bog me down before dessert.

That being said, one of my favorite dining companions told me after our meal at Daryl that he preferred the traditional three- or four-course style of dining. He's an old-fashioned guy in that way, so consider the inclinations of those you bring along. I should mention my pal's feelings were colored by the fact that he felt he didn't get enough to eat. That was my fault for not asking him whether he wanted something else. It's easy to avoid a similar problem by inquiring about everyone's degree of fullness, since it's so simple to order another small plate or two to fill the gaps at any juncture in the meal.

If you're concerned about your bill, you might want to bring along a little calculator to keep a running total, since you're likely to order a lot. We found the bill quite reasonable for the amount and variations of food and wine we enjoyed.

Should you be looking for a late-night drink spot, which is often hard to find, it's nice to know that the bar stays open to 2 a.m. on Saturdays, 11 p.m. Mondays through Fridays and 9 p.m. Sundays. Also, management expects to begin serving Sunday brunch from 10:30 a.m.-2 p.m. in the near future.

This restaurant got off to a very fast start and is likely to become even better, not to mention more popular, as people get the hang of it and the good service is polished. David Drake, with the help of his team, definitely has delivered another winner.