

Elegant Warmth

BY RACHEL FORREST

Simply put, of all of the restaurants Jay McSharry has opened or had a hand in, The Dunaway Restaurant at Strawberry Banke is my favorite. While the décor reflects the understated simplicity found in his other spots (and we all know them - Radici, Little Louie's, Jumpin' Jay's) this new restaurant is elegant in a way the others are not, cozy and warm instead of bright with color or mod with sleek lines, and the cuisine is, as Churchill once said of Russia, a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma - at once complex and layered with undetectable flavor profiles but also wrapped in our familiar New England, more specifically Seacoast, culinary sensibilities.

When I first heard about the talent that was going into the open kitchen in the back of the charming multilevel dining room I swooned. Chef Mary Dumont, a Seacoast native who worked in San Francisco's finest kitchens including Campton Place and Jardiniere heads the culinary team, but while Dumont is the driving force in the kitchen, two more very talented chefs are a part of the creative recipe here. Both Evan Hennessey as sous chef and another major upcoming talent, Ben Hasty, came of Dover's Atlantic Culinary Academy, but also ventured out to study with America's finest and most innovative chefs - Thomas Keller and Grant Achatz - and brought back ideas that are incorporated into the dishes here. With Dumont in the lead, this is a formidable combination of talent that will only continue to evolve.

Local is key here, with in season produce from the Banke's historic garden in warmer months and beef from Maine, but also produce from the staff - a pig from Hasty's dad's farm for charcuterie will come soon, and there might be in-season produce from Hennessey's garden or even whatever the waitstaff has to offer. There's a front of the house/back of the house cross-pollination and Dumont now makes sure the waitstaff knows what they're talking about at the table when describing dishes, which was not always the case in initial visits when service seemed a tad cursory. Now with servers like Lisa Sammons, a culinary school grad herself, I find that both expertise and efficiency have improved.

Meals can begin on a small scale, with a "tastes" menu, something we're seeing more of on the Seacoast. Little bites that can be surprisingly robust are just \$3.50 to \$5, and tantalize the palate and show off the chef's whimsy as in an Ahi Tuna Duo with bright poached tuna feather light in slices paired with finely chopped tuna tartar glittering like rubies mixed with the smoky flavor of Serrano ham.

A sweet potato gnocchi is sautéed on one side yet still soft mixed with the new "in" vegetable this year, the Brussels Sprout and a sweet and tart pomegranate gastrique (generally a reduction of caramelized sugar and vinegar). Pecky-toe crab comes in a mound on top of crisped celery root with sweet and smoky grilled clementines.

A mix of these "tastes" can make a good appetizer selection, but appetizers are intriguing as well. Pan-seared scallops are immense and cooked perfectly to just pink inside, but crispy outside and served with a delightful find in winter-lightly grilled grapefruit and orange in a pinenut basil vinaigrette (\$9). The use of citrus in colder months is a bold move that works both flavor-wise and emotionally, conjuring the taste and feel of summer.

Grilled foie gras, and foie gras and charcuterie is a specialty of Dumont's, comes with a date and orange chutney, a mixture that comes off like with flavors of an exotic marmalade. Perfectly crisp and smoky outside, the foie gras is still firm inside atop a creamy parsnip puree with a mild vanilla gastrique with a hint of cider (\$16). There is a touch of classic European cuisine meets New England with products from our area prepared with sophisticated techniques that are still neither pretentious nor fussy.

The same goes with the entrees here. On initial visits I found some of the dishes to be over-salted but thankfully, in later visits this hasn't usually been the case. Now, a roasted breast and confit leg of chicken with a sweet potato risotto, the Brussels sprouts and a bacon jus (\$21) is tender and juicy with the breast cooked to a fine crisp while the confit shreds on the fork with no over-saltiness despite the smoky bacon.

Roasted monkfish, once a rarity on menus and one of my favorite seafoods, here is stuffed with fines herbs, and a hint of smoked paprika, a flavor I sensed but couldn't identify until I asked Dumont about it. And that's what I mean about the layers and enigmas in the cuisine here. There's always the feeling that you just don't know quite what is making the combination so successful, but it's a good mystery to enjoy. The monkfish is sautéed creating a crust on the outside, sliced, and laid atop a broth with freshly braised artichokes, huge lima beans from Peru and tender mahogany clams (\$23).

Braised roulade of beef shortribs (\$24) is one of the best examples of the dish I've had in the area, with the tenderness and incredible feeling in the mouth that comes only from the best housemade stock. Dumont uses Maine's Wolfe Neck Farm for the beef and cuts the bones "the long way," which most don't. This releases more of the inner flavors for the stock. The result is an unusually intense beef flavor coupled with glazed carrots and a creamy horseradish potato puree underneath. This was the only element that was still a tad salty for my taste.

Desserts are good here with housemade sorbets and a gooey warm chocolate cake (\$8). On a recent visit a frozen lemon soufflé was made with both regular and a bit more intense Meyer lemons on a fruit puree. Dumont likens it to an Italian semifreddo, a creamy half chilled dessert and it was indeed a good texture and flavor combination.

But you must try the cheese plate either instead of or after dessert. Dumont is an expert in designing a cheese plate with a progression of flavors and instead of the same old grapes, bread and maybe a few dollops of fig jam with an assortment of cheese. She pairs cheeses a French Tomme de Levezou or a mild Cashel Irish Blue from Ireland with flavor elements like finely sliced green olives or housemade pink tart pickled fennel. Plates range from one cheese at \$5, three at \$10 and five at \$14 and it's well worth going for all five to explore the flavors, or as Dumont says, "the layers of experience," layers that come not only from the cuisine here but from the moment you are greeted at the door by gracious Manager Chris Mealey with a warm welcome into a new culinary adventure.

THE DUNAWAY RESTAURANT

66 Marcy St. at Strawberry Banke Portsmouth, 373-6112
www.dunawayrestaurant.com

Hours: Tues-Thurs. 5:30- 9:30 p.m. Fri-Sat. 5-10 p.m.

Food **** 1/2 Local New England cuisine, yes, but with innovative influences and layer upon layer of intriguing flavors. Spectacular talent creating ever-delightful tastes.

Service **** During initial visits, service was just a tad lagging, but later visits showed expertise I haven't seen in ages, with staff who understands the nuances of the menu.

Ambience **** 1/2 Excellent bar hang with a cozy fireplace and cushy seats. The décor is appropriately modern colonial austere, yet filled with warm woods and smooth lines.

Overall **** 1/2 With an innovative and talented team in the kitchen, a warm atmosphere and ever-improving service, The Dunaway is already a star spot to me, but I can see it will continue to evolve and surprise.

★★★★★ Excellent | ★★★★★ Very Good | ★★★ Good | ★★ Fair | ★ Poor