



FOOD DRINK REVIEW

BY DAVE MCINTYRE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DARKO ZAGAR



The inviting Tasting Room at Restaurant Eve, left.
Roasted monkfish with a stew of tomatoes,
chorizo, olives and potatoes, above.

WELCOME TO EDEN *Step inside Restaurant Eve and prepare to be transported*

Old Town Alexandria is already a world apart, one escapist level away from the 24/7 rush of a world capital—that is, once you find a parking space. But step through the brick-lined colonnade that serves as the entrance to Restaurant Eve and you may feel you've slipped into another reality entirely.

"Where am I?" I wondered when I arrived for my first visit. The intimate bar and lounge facing the already forgotten street suggested a chic country inn somewhere near Middleburg. The hostess then led us in the other direction, past a glassed-in wine cellar that evoked the latest culinary mecca in the Napa Valley and into the Bistro. Earth tones and skylights offered visual links between food and farm and transformed the fading sunlight of a late spring evening into a welcoming glow. The first bite of salt cod fritters with remoulade, tomato confit and olives convinced me that I was at a gracious *auberge* in the remote hills of Provence.

There were more echoes of France on the Bistro menu. A romaine salad with bacon lardons and a poached egg struck a classic note, while tuna poached in olive oil and dressed with a meyer lemon vinaigrette was as nouveau as it was delicious. Bouillabaisse sang of the Côte d'Azur, as did roasted monkfish, with its stew of tomatoes, chorizo, and olives thickened by a garlicky aioli. Pan-roasted sweetbreads, crispy on the outside and yet nearly custard inside, brought French country fare into the 21st century.

But on another visit, just a few steps away in the Tasting Room, the globe started spinning—to the shores of modernist Spain with cucumber foam on briny oysters, to Italy with light-as-air gnocchi with spring garlic and golden beets, to jolly ol' England and a Stilton flan. The regional references blurred as a lusty Belgian lambic ale sabayon accompanied a Muenster-like Winnemere cheese from Jaspar Hill Farm in Vermont. But it was the hog's head "burger"—a riff on tête de porc that poked fun at those trite mini-burgers littering menus all over town—that persuaded me to surrender all pretense of putting this restaurant in a geographic pigeonhole. Restaurant Eve is an Eden for foodies.

By now you've probably read the story of Cathal (a silent "t" please) and Meshelle Armstrong, the husband-and-wife team that opened Restaurant Eve two years ago and named it for their daughter. Family travels throughout Europe and summers spent with a family in France ignited a love of food at an early age for the Dublin-born Cathal. He honed his craft for 12 years in various DC restaurants, most notably as the original chef de cuisine at Jeff and Sallie Buben's Bistro Bis, before he and Meshelle went into business for themselves. Their second restaurant, a Dublin-style fish-and-chips house, is scheduled to open in Old Town this summer, and will be named Eamonn's after their son.

Restaurant Eve was an immediate hit among the local food cognoscenti. The Clyde's group even raided Armstrong's kitchen, hiring away sous chef Nathan Beauchamp to head the kitchen at 1789, a sign that the restaurant industry was taking notice of the newcomer in Old Town. The national media caught on, too, and *Food & Wine* magazine named 36-year-old Armstrong one of America's Best New Chefs for 2006, an honor previously bestowed on DC-area chefs Roberta Donna, Frank Ruta, Fabio Trabocchi and Eric Ziebold.

Armstrong describes his cuisine as "modern American," that catch-all phrase often carelessly applied to restaurants that don't really fit into any well-known niche and that almost always lack focus. "In cuisines all over the world, there is a movement toward using local ingredients and preparing them with classical techniques," he explains, unhelpfully. Most chefs these days will say something similar, as if it was taught in media relations class at the CIA (that would be the Culinary Institute of America). Yet this chef (who never attended cooking school) seems to be trying to define modern American, which puts him in a local class with Todd Gray of Equinox, Ann Cashion of Cashion's Eat Place, Jonathan Krinn of 2941 and Armstrong's mentor, Jeff Buben at his flagship, Vidalia. He has an intuitive sense of his message; when he reaches full voice, watch out.

Part of that message already rings loud and clear. The Armstrongs have been vocal champions of local farmers and artisan food producers. When their primary produce supplier lost his lease last fall, the Armstrongs rallied supporters in the restaurant community to trek to the Eastern Shore to help disassemble and relocate greenhouses, crops and farm equipment.

To deliver his message, Armstrong has created two, if not three, restaurants in one. The Bistro offers a comfortable and delicious dining experience anchored in Armstrong's renditions of French cuisine. The bar

the half-bottle, and it's always worth your while to ask what else he might have that hasn't yet made it to the list.

Walking through the colonnade back into the streets of Old Town Alexandria, I realized I'd been viewing Restaurant Eve in the wrong way. It doesn't belong in Napa, or Provence, or any other culinary mecca. It belongs here. This young chef, born in Ireland and steeped in France, was not offering a culinary escape to the outside world as much as he was showing me the potential of home—local ingredients fashioned through classical tradition to produce something subtly, intriguingly unique. ■

RESTAURANT EVE 110 SOUTH PITT STREET, ALEXANDRIA. 703.706.0450. **HOURS:** LUNCH MON.–FRI., 11:30AM–2:30PM; DINNER MON.–THURS., 5:30–10:00PM, FRI.–SAT., 5:30–10:30PM. **WHO'S THERE:** THE CROWD SKEWS OLDER IN THE EARLY EVENING, WITH YOUNGER COUPLES FILLING TABLES LATER AS THE MUSIC SHIFTS FROM ELLA FITZGERALD TO ANNIE LENNOX OR EVEN HIP-HOP. "CHECK, PLEASE!" **WHERE TO SIT:** DEPENDS ON WHERE YOU WANT TO EAT—BISTRO, BAR OR TASTING ROOM. THERE ARE NO BAD TABLES IN WHAT MIGHT BE THE WASHINGTON AREA'S MOST COMFORTABLE AND INVITING RESTAURANT. **ABOUT THE WINE LIST:** A CAN'T-MISS SELECTION OF SMALL PRODUCERS FROM AROUND THE WORLD. OR JUST IGNORE THE LIST AND HAVE THRASHER PAIR WINES WITH YOUR TASTING MENU. **ABOUT DESSERT:** PASTRY CHEF TOM WELLINGS, A VETERAN OF NYC'S WD50 AND THE RITZ-CARLTON AT TYSONS CORNER, MIGHT OFFER YOU A SECOND-HELPING OF VEGETABLES, SUCH AS BEETS STARRING IN A GOAT CHEESE PANNA COTTA. BUT DON'T WORRY, CHOCOLATE BEIGNETS AND A DECADENT TAKE ON FRENCH TOAST OFFER MORE TRADITIONAL CHOICES, NOT TO MENTION ONE OF THE CITY'S MOST TALKED ABOUT SWEET ENDINGS, THE PLAYFUL BIRTHDAY CAKE. **WHAT IT COSTS:** BISTRO APPETIZERS \$10–\$13, ENTREES \$25–\$32. TASTING ROOM, \$95 FOR FIVE COURSES, \$125 FOR NINE COURSES. **RATING:** ★★☆☆

What the stars mean: 1 = fair, some noteworthy qualities; 2 = good, above average; 3 = very good, well above norm; 4 = excellent, among the area's best; 5 = world-class, extraordinary in every detail. Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambiance and service.

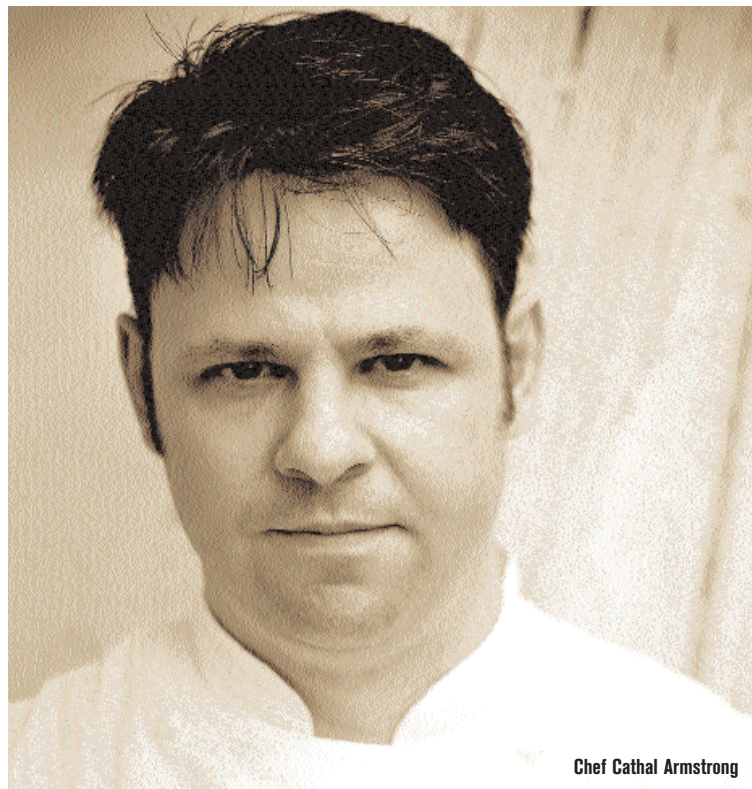
THE GLOBE STARTED SPINNING—TO THE SHORES OF MODERNIST SPAIN WITH CUCUMBER FOAM ON BRINY OYSTERS, TO ITALY WITH LIGHT-AS-AIR GNOCCHI WITH SPRING GARLIC AND GOLDEN BEETS, TO JOLLY OL' ENGLAND AND A STILTON FLAN.

is the most casual way to experience the restaurant, with a selection of small dishes (although the Bistro menu is available, too) and a "lickety split" lunch option for gourmands with clock-watching bosses.

The slightly more formal Tasting Room allows the chef to play around and define his cuisine through five-course and nine-course menus. Here, for instance, you might find a "tasting" of local spring lamb featuring barely seared loin meat, a warm pâté made from the shoulder that echoes the classic jambon persillé and the roasted kidney; a lobster crème brûlée; or a goat cheese panna cotta with three different renditions of beet. You will also find an army of servers well-versed in each dish and its ingredients.

Innovations are subtle and playful: that warm terrine, for instance, using agar agar (made from a sea vegetable) as a gelling agent so it remains firm even when warm; or a chuckle-inducing fruit jelly on the petit fours plate that's actually red pepper, not raspberry. Or that hog's head burger. Armstrong is broadening our perspective on food without forcing us to rethink it altogether. Exciting and fun, and yet comfortable and unfussy.

The wine cellar is the playroom of general manager/sommelier Todd Thrasher, who has a following among thirsty folk because of his talent for inventing unusual cocktails. Thrasher makes homemade tonic and sweet and dry vermouth for the restaurant's bar. His wine list, like the menu, skirts the globe, and his pairings (an option with the tasting menus) can whisk you from Alsace to Stellenbosch to Mendoza to Piemonte. The selection emphasizes small producers, including some rare sherries from Lustau, one of Spain's leading houses. Thrasher also offers a varied selection of wines by the glass and roughly 50 by



Chef Cathal Armstrong