



Bonnie Weller/Inquirer

A notably moist pork chop takes on a Moroccan theme with a spicy tomato gravy.

Domaine Hudson Wine Bar & Eatery ★ ★ (Very Good)

by Craig LaBan, restaurant critic

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For two decades as a CPA, Tom Hudson was in the business of helping other people realize their entrepreneurial dreams. But after undergoing major neck surgery in 2005 – ironically, on April 15 – Hudson knew the time had come to follow his own passion: wine.

Nine-month-old Domaine Hudson Wine Bar & Eatery is the result of that epiphany – a sophisticated little Wilmington bistro that focuses on wines by the glass and a New American menu from ex-Dilworthtown Inn chef Jason Barrowcliff.

The fact that wine bars with small-plate menus are currently trendy in Philadelphia (think Ansill, Amada, Raw, Mantra, Tria) appears to be entirely a coincidence.

Domaine's decor – a 75-seat, low-ceilinged space warmed with faux-leather walls, dark woods, tapestries, and houndstooth fabric-covered chairs – feels more like a country club library than a trendy hotspot. It's comfy in a Ralph Lauren kind of way.

"As an accountant, I'm pretty conservative," concedes Hudson.

But he has also approached the wine bar concept with the kind of meticulous attention to quality and details you'd expect from a CPA, from the five varieties of high-end German crystal ("stemware is very important to me," he says) to the kind of cellar a real wine lover can enjoy - full of intriguing finds, variety and value. There is a nice list of bottles marked up \$20 over retail. But wines by the glass are the main feature, and are available in different sizes, including smaller pours (3 or 1.5 ounce) priced mostly under \$10 to encourage variety.

Among the 40-plus choices, you won't find the typical middlebrow commercial wines that usually end up poured by the glass. There are some rarities like fragrant white Torrontes from Argentina, a lusty shiraz from Australia's Oliverhill, a crisp white verdejo from Spain, a polished Rion pinot from Burgundy, and the musky sweetness of Hungarian Tokaji – the perfect accompaniment to a plate of charcuterie and artisan cheese.

Domaine's young waitstaff was also impressively adept at matching wines with the food – able to discuss the list in detail without any hint of pretense.

Barrowcliff's solid cooking, meanwhile, has its own qualities, offering more substance than many wine bars but stopping shy of upstaging the wines.

Domaine's basic menu concept is still a little off, an awkward blend of a traditional appetizer-entree format and a half-hearted stab at "small plates." The best dishes were the "petite propositions," although they seemed more like mini-entrees than appetizers. And those plates didn't work as true sharing options, which might be a natural sweet spot for a wine bar. Pairing them with the full-size "grand gestures" for a multi-course meal can be a bit much.

The individual plates, however, are fine, built around good ingredients and crisp cooking that offer interesting flourishes without getting crazy.

Barrowcliff has a particular talent for meats – even in miniature. A single venison chop is succulent, posed over a rich dollop of polenta and a gravy enriched with cassis. A tender double-cut lamb chop basks in the exotic sweetness of an apricot-mint puree touched with curry. A notably moist pork chop takes on a Moroccan theme with a spicy tomato gravy (with that secret North African ingredient known as "V-8 juice") and a dollop of garlicky eggplant purée.

A number of the menu's starters were uninspired. A flatbread with "exotic mushrooms" and crab brought mostly mixed greens, a few errant scraps of crustacean, and a saute of standard-issue fungus over what appeared to be commercial crackers. The creamy vichysoisse needed to be much more chilled. The shrimp stew with tiny ravioli had a pleasant shade of lemongrass, but the broth needed more intensity.

Among the better appetizers, I loved the simplicity of the roasted beet salad with cranberry vinaigrette. The seared scallops were sweet against a buttered succotash of leeks and corn. A lobster tail mango-cucumber salad with macadamia nuts was tender and moist.

Barrowcliff's main courses are a shade less adventurous than the smaller plates. But there's nothing wrong with a classic filet mignon in peppercorn sauce topped with Stilton cheese - not when you can pair it with a good glass of chianti riserva from Isole e Olena or a BenMarco malbec. For the tender short rib glazed in horseradish cream, a South African cab from Graham Beck was the perfect match, picking up the gaminess of boar bacon in the addictive mashed potatoes.

For the luscious fillet of potato-crust rockfish ringed by an herby sauce verte, a racy Austrian gruner veltliner from Krems was ideal. No wine, I think, could have redeemed the chewy, overcooked "European" chicken breasts that came over asparagus risotto. The kitchen is far from perfect.

The desserts were also uneven. The cinnamon-scented creme brulee with a flimsy half-burnt crust, and the fig cake with hardly any figs, can be missed. The caramelized bananas with sinfully moist brown butter tart, meanwhile, is worth ordering another glass – a white port, perhaps, from Quinta do Portal, or a fine muscat from Australia's R.L. Buller, or even a sparkling nip of Diebolt-Vallois Champagne for \$3.60.

If nothing else, Tom Hudson deserves a toast for turning a pain-in-the-neck epiphany into a dream we can all happily drink.

Contact restaurant critic Craig LaBan at 215-854-2682 or claban@phillynews.com. Read his recent work at <http://go.philly.com/craiglaban>.

DETAILS

Rating
2 stars (very good)

Cuisine type
New American

Hours

Tuesday through Saturday, 4:30-10:30 p.m.; Sunday, 4:30-8:30 p.m.

Meals Served

Dinner

Prices

Moderate – \$15–20

Payment methods

MasterCard

Visa

American Express

Discover

Specialties

Cheese plate; roast beet salad; seared scallops; venison chop; lobster tail; short rib;
Moroccan pork chop; rockfish; banana tart.

Alcohol

A superb selection of 40 to 50 wines by the glass.

Parking

Free parking in adjacent Colonial lots after 5 p.m.

Handicap access

Not wheelchair accessible.

Smoking

No smoking.