

Domaine Hudson: Closer to perfection

By Eric Ruth, The News Journal

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Sometimes, something seems missing with the city dining scene. Even at such stalwarts as Deep Blue or the Green Room, performance can soar one night, dip the next. At times, Restaurant 821's brilliance can challenge big-city standards; at other times, it rides a roller coaster of indecision -- swinging from small plates to big, big-shot hangout to bistro, and just this year, announcing it would abandon the haute cuisine approach entirely.

In these times of sagging excitement in the fine dining business, scant few in this town are coming as close to sustaining that sense of consistent satisfaction as Domaine Hudson. The addition of chef Robert Lhulier, who opened and then had to recently shutter his Chef's Table restaurant in Old New Castle, has bolstered a kitchen already capably led by coexecutive chef Jason Barrowcliff. The patience and commitment of owner Tom Hudson have allowed a once-young restaurant to find its maturity and bring the city a dependable destination just when they seemed harder to find.

Hudson envisioned a place where the wine was celebrated as robustly as the food, a place where "small pour" samplings from his deep cellar were encouraged and accommodated, giving Domaine Hudson a framework that rested on two potentially unsteady foundations -- customers who would embrace it and cuisine that would honor it.

With Lhulier on board, Domaine Hudson now possesses even more potential for exploration and discovery. The most sophisticated chefs often embrace the simplest ideals and elevate them with mystifying grace -- see how the chefs take a plate of salt-roasted beets and give them an earthy elegance with candied pecans, a goat cheese crouton and a snappy vinaigrette laced with orange and mustard (\$8). Watch as the brussels sprouts hater at your table reconsiders after tasting how sweet and robust they can be when they are caramelized, paired with mushrooms and dressed with white truffle oil (\$10).

Such small-plate goodness is surely not a unique achievement these days, but what sets Domaine Hudson apart is the application of that smart, tempting approach throughout the menu, and staffers' skill at guiding diners through potentially intimidating pairings of wine with food. The recently introduced assortment of artisanal cheeses from Murray's Cheese Shop in New York is sufficient to craft a meal on its own, and the array of "petite propositions" gives diners the option to choose a portion size that suits their mood.

The only pain here is in the choosing. The solace is in the assurance that choices rarely go wrong.

When they do, it's usually a slight waver of balance -- like the too tart edge that came with a plate of sautéed escargots with toasted brioche, cauliflower and a garlic-punched Pernod butter (\$13). There are moments of unaccountable stinginess -- like the curry-accented mushroom soup with little evidence, either texturally or sensually, of mushrooms (\$9).

Usually, a more elegant footing is a quick step away. Perfectly Frenched herb-crusted lamb chops (\$15 per small plate, \$29 for large) find earthy sophistication in a somewhat perplexing -- and completely luscious -- combination of a hedgehog mushroom, mint salad, curry sauce and 15-year-old balsamic vinegar. A Niman Ranch pork chop -- a formidable beast with jutting bone and a fennel crust -- is tamed with a sauce that nicely bounces sweet tastes of sherry and figs against the pork (\$22).

That kind of delicately robust counterpunch would have brought a perfectly cooked, perfectly tender filet mignon (\$29) even closer to perfection, certainly more so than its somehow hesitant accompaniment of tasso ham, asparagus hash and garlic cream.

It's rare that such a cascade of ingredients fails to perform, especially considering how deftly the feat is pulled off elsewhere. It probably would have been satisfying enough to get such a well-crusted, well-cooked piece of sea bass (\$28); it is all the more impressive to see how the chefs have melded it with mussels, mushrooms and an assertively smoky ragout of white beans. The sweet, dark edge of a well-executed port wine sauce does justice to any duck breast (\$21); but who can complain when it's elevated all the more by a polenta cake and braised shallots.

Such steady successes should serve to show that the thrill isn't quite yet gone in this quirky little town. Thanks to places like Domaine Hudson, it feels like there was never any doubt about it.



Pan-seared sea bass
Domaine Hudson, Wilmington

The News Journal/JENNIFER CORBETT

*Domaine Hudson ***1/2 (very good to extraordinary)*

Hours: Lunch 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Mon.-Fri.; dinner 5 p.m.-10:30 p.m. Mon.-Sat. Closed Sundays.

Dinner prices: Appetizers \$8-\$13; small-plate entrees \$11-\$15; large-plate entrees \$21-\$29.

Credit cards: American Express, [Discover](#), MasterCard, Visa

Recommended dishes: Salt-roasted beets with candied pecans, warm goat cheese crouton and orange-Dijon citrus vinaigrette (\$8); caramelized brussels sprouts with mushrooms, lentils and white truffle oil (\$10); veal mignon with *maitake* mushrooms, thyme and Asiago cheese with tomato-pancetta creamed fingerling potatoes (\$14/\$27); herb-crusted New Zealand lamb chop with a hedgehog mushroom, fingerling potatoes, mint salad, curry sauce and 15-year-old balsamic (\$15/\$29); pan-seared sea bass with mussels, mushrooms and smoky white bean ragout (\$28); Niman Ranch pork rib chop crusted with toasted fennel, with sherry-fig sauce and roasted butternut squash purée (\$22); free-range duck breast with polenta cake, five-spice carrots, braised shallots and port wine sauce (\$21); artisanal cheese selections by Murray's Cheese Shop in New York City (three cheeses for \$15/five for \$25).

Food: Two of the state's top chefs and a maturing culinary sensibility make this one of the state's premier destinations for truly appreciating and understanding the dynamics of upscale food and wine.

Atmosphere: Coolly casual, somewhat snug, thoroughly welcoming.

Service: Staffers with such a thorough knowledge of cuisine and wine are a rare find these days.

Children's Menu: No.

Healthy options: Appealing salad choices and small-plate options make it possible to take a restrained tack.

Outdoor seating: No.