

FOOD

Wine tastings

by HOLLY NORTON | spark

11/23/2005

Restaurateurs crave regulars. They want to give people a reason to come back to their spot again and again, whether it's for their infamous bisque or their to-die-for desserts.

But what if the idea is to get regulars to return for what they can't expect?

That is the concept behind Domaine Hudson, a new wine bar and restaurant on Washington Street in downtown Wilmington. Tom Hudson, partnering in his first restaurant venture with his wife Meg, promises that they will offer some signature items consistently, but he plans to change the menu and the wine list frequently. Executive chef Jason Barrowcliff, the former executive chef at the Dilworthtown Inn and chef de cuisine at Wilmington Country Club, likes to keep his customers on their toes.

As we crossed through the front door, I knew that I was walking into something unique in Delaware. The rich, deep red walls gave the dimly light room a romantic, yet slightly masculine vibe. My dining companion and I were seated at a table for two by the window overlooking Washington Street and settled in with our paper print-out menus. The wine menu separated whites from champagne, reds and dessert, and the storage temperatures were noted accordingly.

Our waiter suggested we sample from the small plates and appetizers as we tried different wines and pointed out the 1.5-oz., 3-oz. and 5-oz. pours for our tasting pleasure. Creative wine drinkers can put together their own flights, like a variety of Sauvignon Blancs from different regions.

The menu offered a scallop & mussel chowder with saffron broth and fennel seed oil (\$8), which sounded nice on this rainy night, but instead we went with the exotic mushroom and goat cheese strudel with sage butternut squash puree and porcini mustard jus (\$11). The layers of flavor came out between sips of the Babcock Tri County Pinot Noir out of Santa Barbara. My companion was tearing through the Morbier cheese and charcuterie plate (\$10) which included a block of two cheeses – one from morning milk and one from evening milk – separated by a thin layer of ash. I had to stop him to get a bite.

Our server recommended the Stolpman "L'Avion" Roussane/Viognier from Santa Ynez Valley to complement the cheese. His recommendation worked well, though I got the feeling he was still learning the list.

For our main courses – or "grand gesture" as it's listed on the menu – we tried the pepper seared tenderloin of beef with creamed leek mash, red wine balsamic reduction with roquefort butter (\$25) and the pan roasted rockfish over basil pesto risotto served with crispy calamari in a tomato fennel beurre blanc sauce (\$22). We devoured each bite in between sips of our dinner wine selections and found sharing irresistible, though people with bigger appetites might still crave more.

We shared the chocolate hazelnut mousse with chantilly cream and raspberries (\$7), served packed tightly into an espresso-sized cup. My only mistake was going for the Warre's "Warrior" special reserve port, which wasn't to my taste.

Still, that's exactly why we plan to return. The folks behind Domaine Hudson make dining an adventure – and one they're willing to help with, keeping track of wines ordered by regulars. Next time, if they still have it, I've got an eye on the porcini and goat cheese crusted New Zealand lamb (\$13).



JESSICA BRATTON | spark

Three pours of Jim Jim Shiraz – in 1.5-oz., 3-oz. and 5-oz. glasses – complement the exotic mushroom & goat cheese strudel from Domaine Hudson in Wilmington.

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