

## **Fine wines enhance an assured, intriguing menu** – Eric Ruth

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I'd like to take a moment to have a word with some of you. I don't know your names, but I see you all the time -- waiting outside chain restaurants in the rain, in the winter, without a reservation and without hope of seeing a plate of warm food before 9 p.m.

You folks shouldn't bother going to Domaine Hudson.

If you want predictability, it will be scary. If you want mediocrity, you will be disappointed. Possibly, the night will be more of a cultural and culinary shock than you can handle.

Be warned: at Domaine Hudson, you don't have to wait endlessly for a table. There will be no clueless-but-adorable young hostesses, no "bloomin' onions," no watery, bottomless iceberg lettuce salads. No groaning heaps of mushy pasta, no pasty prefab desserts. You will be confronted by wines you've never heard of and may suffer through menu descriptions without a cutesy adjective to be found.

What's worse, the atmosphere will be pleasant and sophisticated; the service professional and unobtrusive. You will get your food promptly, and the waiter will actually have a working knowledge of the menu. There will be 50-odd wines by the glass, all of them chosen by a person who actually knows wine, and all of them priced in small portions good for sampling.

In short, Domaine Hudson has none of the attributes of Delaware's most beloved restaurants. For some of us, that failure is the best thing that's happened for Wilmington in a while.

This is a city that has enjoyed a welcome uplift in classiness over recent years -- thanks to Moro, Eclipse Bistro, Deep Blue and 821 -- and Domaine Hudson adds another hip destination to the mix. The dining room is tight and noisy, and can be prone to some new-restaurant stumbles, but mostly steps off with a steady stride as soon as you enter. The setting is elegant without overreaching, and faux-leather paint gives the walls a warm tone.

Owners Tom and Meg Hudson are succeeding with concepts others have tried, but haven't brought together -- top-notch wines by the glass, a glorious selection of artisanal cheeses and a menu that manages to incorporate the "small plate" approach in such a way that you feel inspired rather than ripped-off.

Chef Jason Barrowcliff, former executive chef at the Dilworthtown Inn in Chester County, Pa., has made Domaine Hudson the kind of place where even the soups and salads are intriguing -- the scallop, mussel and crab chowder with a lobster saffron broth (\$8) sounds thoroughly enticing, and it's hard to resist a brie and arugula salad with caramelized pears, walnuts and roasted shallot vinaigrette (\$10).

Next, dive into the appetizers -- called "amusing offerings" on the menu -- admittedly, the almond-crusted sea scallops (\$9) are uninspired, perfunctory and a little underdone, but the mushroom and

goat cheese strudel (\$11) has a sweet, earthy edge that's laced with wine, porcini mushrooms and mustard.

Such creations were made for fine wine, and Domaine Hudson is simply the best in the state at fulfilling our price-phobic desires. Instead of shelling out \$95 for a bottle of Château de Crapshoot, we are presented with a list that takes us around the world, glass by glass, sip by sip, dish by dish, ranging from 1 1/2-ounce tastes to 5-ounce pours -- for a few bucks a glass.

Such affordable encouragement helps Domaine Hudson's solid food shine. Small-plate dishes called "petite propositions" bring such winners as a salmon filet (\$14), cured with citrus, stoked with crab, and brightened by a lemon-caper vinaigrette and the snap of sea salt. Chunks of South African lobster tail (\$15) come with American caviar and a Thai cucumber salsa that is cautiously sharp, appropriately fruity.

New Zealand lamb chops (\$13) are crusted with porcini and goat cheese, fortified with a truffled fingerling potato salad and speak of the sweet, sensual tastes of garlic and onion.

Entrees may show the chain-restaurant gang that high-end satisfaction doesn't have to be high-priced. Braised beef short ribs (\$17) have a soft, herby undertone that's countered by the dreamy-creaminess of a shallot and parsnip purée. The slightly dry character of the filet mignon (\$25) is redeemed by its tender nature, its rich demi-glace and its creamy mashed potatoes.

Red snapper (\$19) is given an earthy, irresistible nature -- crispy skin, moist flesh underneath, with salty nuggets of prosciutto and a broth that gives it all a meaty, almost beefy attitude. It's an attitude of confidence, of courage, and it's continued in dessert -- especially with the chocolate lava cake running with a warm liquid center and in the grilled bananas Foster spring roll.

With such attention to detail, it's tempting to argue that Domaine Hudson stands as one of the best overall dining experiences in the city. With such a new, affordable way to enjoy fine food and wine, there even might be a chance that Delaware's chain-restaurant addicts will catch on to all they're missing, and all the money they're wasting.

Sadly, I don't think that's going to happen anytime soon.

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The News Journal/CARLA VARISCO

Lobster tail | Domaine Hudson | Wilmington

## Domaine Hudson Wine Bar & Eatery \* \* \* (very good)

1314 N. Washington St., Wilmington. 655-WINE (655-9463). [www.domainehudson.com](http://www.domainehudson.com)

**HOURS:** Dinner 4:30 p.m.-10:30 p.m. Tue.-Sat., 4:30 p.m.-8 p.m. Sun.

**DINNER PRICES:** Appetizers \$9-\$15. Entrees \$17-\$25

**CREDIT CARDS:** American Express, Discover, MasterCard, Visa

**RECOMMENDED DISHES:** Exotic mushroom and goat cheese strudel with sage butternut squash purée and porcini mustard sauce (\$11); organic citrus cured salmon with angel hair pasta, jumbo lump crabmeat and a lemon-caper-coriander vinaigrette (\$14); porcini and goat cheese-crusting New Zealand lamb with truffled fingerling potato salad and sage lamb *jus* (\$13); South African cold-water lobster tail with American sturgeon caviar and Thai cucumber salsa (\$15); braised beef short ribs with parsnip and roasted shallot purée, cabernet demi-glace and horseradish cream (\$17); cassoulet of red snapper with prosciutto, tomatoes and shiitake mushrooms (\$19); artisanal cheese selection (\$4-\$5.50 each).

**FOOD:** Wilmington has gained another appealing destination for upscale, sophisticated New American cuisine, a repertoire enhanced by a wine list that inspires temptation and allows affordable explorations.

**ATMOSPHERE:** Tastefully refined touches help turn snugness into coziness, and help the noisiness seem more like a pleasantly lively buzz.

**SERVICE:** Servers' strong knowledge of the food and wine help elevate the ambience.

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