

Sophistication comes with Fairview's fine food

By GREG COX
CORRESPONDENT

I seldom take advantage of valet parking, but I do when I dine at Fairview. Somehow, driving up the long approach to the Washington Duke Inn, a palatial luxury hotel built in the manner of an English country estate,

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transforms me from a small town Southern boy, reluctant to hand my keys over to a stranger, into a sophisticated man about town. I like to arrive early and — another thing I rarely do — enjoy a cocktail in the bar before adjourning to the dining room. A Maker's Mark Manhattan, perhaps, "shaken not stirred" as the bar menu says, and poured tableside.

I don't often wear a jacket and tie to dinner, either, but I invariably do when I'm dining at Fairview. Not that it's required. It isn't, though you won't often see anyone dressed in anything more casual than khakis and a golf shirt (and I like to imagine that those people just finished 18 holes at the Inn's world class golf course, which the dining room overlooks). It's just that a jacket and tie seem appropriate when I'm surrounded by English antiques, museum-quality paintings and sumptuous upholstery.

Don't get me wrong. For all its luxe, Fairview is not a stuffy place. Potted tropical trees — and in the early evening, lots of natural light — soften the look. And the uniformed wait staff, for all their polish, are as adept at making guests feel comfortable as they are at crumbing a table.

Executive chef Jason Cunningham's seasonally changing menu follows suit, gracefully walking a tightrope between stimulating the jaded palate and soothing the



Ahi tuna is served with lemon sunflower seed risotto, sautéed spinach, saffron coulis and crispy leeks at Fairview.

STAFF PHOTO BY JULI LEONARD

weary traveler. Those seeking the comfort of the familiar will find it in lavish renditions of shrimp cocktail and Caesar salad, a signature crab cake notable for its profligate use of jumbo lump crabmeat, and a standing selection of expertly grilled steaks.

Those craving gastronomic adventure will find it an abundance, as well. On the current menu, starters range from shrimp and corn chowder to ginger beef salad to an inspired pairing of sweet potato gnocchi and duck confit, tossed in sage brown butter with dried cranberries, toasted walnuts and roasted carrots. Another first-course option, braised beef short rib with exotic mushrooms, roasted celery and plum-infused veal reduction, delivers comfort and pizzazz on the same plate.

The adventure continues with a varied entree offering. Hawaiian striped marlin over green

bamboo rice (so named because the grains are infused with the chlorophyll of bamboo, giving them a bewitching pale jade color) with savoy cabbage slaw and coriander beet emulsion is a delight for the eye if a bit overwrought for the palate. The sauce poivrade, which adds a pungent counterpoint to butter knife-tender bison medallions and savory herbed grits, on the other hand, is spot on. So is the combination of roasted rack of Colorado lamb, huckleberry lamb jus, exotic mushrooms and rosemary potato galette. And the truffle-laced mousseline slipped beneath the skin of a pan-roasted organic chicken breast permeates the flesh with an earthy aroma that is downright intoxicating.

With some 250 wines (40 available by the glass), Fairview's Wine Spectator Award-winning cellar is more than up to the challenge of matching chef Cunningham's inventive offering. There's

Fairview

The Washington Duke Inn & Golf Club, 3001 Cameron Blvd., Durham 490-0999

www.washingtondukeinn.com

Cuisine: contemporary

Rating: ★★★★★½

Prices: \$\$\$\$

Atmosphere: stately and elegant

Service: polished

Recommended: pretty much everything; it's hard to miss

Open: breakfast, lunch and dinner daily; jazz brunch Sunday

Reservations: accepted

Other: Visa, MasterCard, American Express, Discover; full bar (outstanding wine list); smoke free (smoking permitted on the terrace); accommodates children

The N&O's critic dines anonymously; the newspaper pays for all meals. We rank restaurants in five categories:

★★★★★ Extraordinary.

★★★★ Excellent.

★★★ Above average.

★★ Average.

★ Fair.

even an exceptional selection of dessert wines and brandies to pair with desserts ranging from coconut panna cotta to maple walnut soufflé to a duet of molten dark and milk chocolate cakes that's as sinful as it sounds.

For all the risks it takes, the kitchen rarely missteps. And when it does, as it did with an appetizer I was served recently featuring two pan-seared diver scallops — one of them considerably smaller than the other and overcooked — you can be sure it will be cheerfully and quickly rectified.

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Your take: Let us know about your experience at Fairview by responding at blogs.newsobserver.com/epicurean.