

FAIRVIEW DINING ROOM

At Washington Duke Inn

BY BRIAN ADORNETTO, FOOD EDITOR | PHOTOS BY NANCY THOMAS



PHOTO COURTESY WASHINGTON DUKE INN



The Fairview Dining Room in Durham's Washington Duke Inn is a AAA Four Diamond Award winner, a *Forbes Travel Guide* Four-Star restaurant, and recipient of the *Wine Spectator* Award of Excellence. Yet strangely, it remains a locally underappreciated and almost clandestine gem. Executive Chef Jason Cunningham is arguably the most talented chef in the Triangle that you've never (or have rarely) heard of. This begs the question: why?

Is it because the restaurant, along with the inn and golf club, are owned by Duke University and originally opened in 1988 to serve the needs of the university and Durham's business community? Is it because few realize the restaurant has since become a destination in and of itself? Maybe it is because the restaurant staff values technique and first-rate hospitality instead of short-lived trends and strives to accommodate all tastes instead of pandering to the lowest common denominator. Perhaps the décor, which favors warm Southern

Victorian as opposed to the popular cold industrial design, has something to do with it. After all, the Fairview's pipes and HVAC are concealed above coffered ceilings, its brick exterior walls are covered in rich wooden wainscoting, and the many large windows are dressed in floor-to-ceiling drapes. The chairs are even cushioned and upholstered, in other words, actually comfortable. Plus, the dining room contains live green plants and

fresh-cut flowers throughout with nary a mason jar, bar rag, or exposed lightbulb in sight.

Whatever the reason, it's a shame. Overlooking this special place is to miss out on one of the best dining experiences in the area. The space embodies charm and grace, and the service is as friendly as it is meticulous. While in the kitchen, Chef Cunningham sources and cooks with locally grown foods, which he pairs with the finest ingredients from around the world to prepare seasonally inspired contemporary cuisine.

Additionally, the eco-friendly property was awarded Green Star Gold Level Status for Sustainability by the International Association of Conference Centers and received the City of Durham's EnviroStars Environmental Achievement Award for Water Conservation, Water Quality, and Waste Reduction. The entire establishment adheres to an ambitious recycling program that includes oil, batteries, toners, and ink cartridges as well as the usual suspects. Even retired bed sheets are repurposed; they are donated to the Duke



Chef de Cuisine Murray Healy and Executive Chef Jason Cunningham

Lemur Center to comfort expect- ing lemur mothers. The entire operation prints only on recycled paper containing a minimum of 30% post-recycled content and requires eco-friendly office and cleaning supplies from its ven- dors. Throughout the property, all disposable products are either recycled or recyclable and Styro- foam, as well as other hazardous products, has been banned. Water

conservation, along with waste reduction and energy efficiency, influence all operational deci- sions on a daily basis. The kitchen employs a strict food-composting program, while sustainability is a major consideration in both purveyor selection and the daily operation of all food outlets.

Chef Cunningham's menu maintains a delicate balance between the simple and the complex while his food showcases the kitchen's culinary mastery and careful attention to detail. Though the menu changes seasonally, the Fairview's signature dishes



The Parmesan Crusted Diver Scallop appetizer with persimmon foam, sorghum glazed parsnips, herb salad, toasted pumpkin seeds, and Marcona almonds encompassed a wide range of flavors and textures.

remain throughout the year to accommodate the varied tastes of its guests.

Not long after sitting, a fragrant basket of warm, freshly baked sourdough bread, sharp cheddar- chive biscuits, and crunchy baguettes arrived at the table. Next was Chef Cunningham's ode to autumn, Roasted Apple and Turnip Soup with truffle oil and sunflower shoots (\$9). It was earthy, slightly sweet, and rich. Paired with the delicate bubbles and clean citrusy floral flavors of Anna de Codorniu Cava Brut, the enchanting soup set a high bar for the evening.

The Parmesan Crusted Diver Scal- lop appetizer with persimmon foam, sorghum glazed parsnips, herb salad, toasted pumpkin seeds, and Marcona almonds (\$17) encom- passed a wide range of flavors and textures. The dish was cheesy, sweet, grassy, salty, and nutty, as well as creamy, chewy, and crunchy. Team- ing scallops with parsnips was bril- liant, not only in terms of taste but also the witty riff on surf and turf.

The beautifully seared and pan roasted Cobia (\$27) was flaky and succulent. The mild fish was served with Chef Cunningham's superb version of dirty rice. Studded with shrimp, chicken liver, vegetables, and house-made boudin (a Cajun pork and liver sausage), the rice alone would have made a fantastic meal. The Poseidon Estate Chardonnay from Carneros, California, a rich, but crisp wine with tangy minerals and flavorful white stone fruit, further enhanced the offering. My favorite, however, was the Grilled Duroc >>>



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The Fairview Dining Room

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Lunch: Mon–Fri 11:30am–2pm
Dinner: Mon–Sun 5:30–10pm
Weekend Brunch: Sat & Sun 10:30am–2pm
Cuisine: New American
Atmosphere: Southern country club
Service: Formal
Dress: Jacket recommended
Noise Level: Moderate
Wine List: 2015 Wine Spectator Award of Excellence recipient
Reservations: Recommended
Parking: Complimentary valet and parking lot
Features: Gluten-free, vegetarian, and vegan options; weekend brunch; on-premise catering; separate bar and lounge; covered and heated patio; television-less dining room; major credit cards accepted.
Downtowners Tips: The Fairview offers a \$35 three-course pre-fixe dinner from 5:30-6:30pm daily—an absolute steal! For pre-dinner cocktails, a casual meal, or after-dinner drinks, hit up the Bull Durham Bar. With its intimate atmosphere, working fireplace, and laid-back vibe, it's a great way to round out your Washington Duke Inn experience.

Pork Tenderloin with Heritage bacon-Pepsi jus, spaghetti squash, and braised pork cheek ragout (\$27). The tenderloin, taken from the highly sought after Duroc pig (known as the “Black Angus of pork”), was fork-tender and moist. It was the tastiest pork I’ve ever eaten. The squash was cooked tender-crisp, allowing each strand to maintain its integrity, a rare and triumphant feat, as spaghetti squash is generally overcooked and mushy. With its juicy dark berry and cola notes, the Four Graces Willamette Valley Pinot Noir was a delightful match for this dish.

The gluten-free Pear Frangipane Tart (\$10), garnished with pink peppercorn-pine nut brittle and Morello cherry coulis, was nutty and only slightly sweet. The dessert’s combination of roasted pears, creamy almond filling, and cherry sauce was familiar, yet surprisingly unique. I loved



The Duroc pork tenderloin was fork-tender and moist.

its rustic simplicity. The comforting Warm Spiced Apple Cake with caramelized apples, honey ice cream, and toffee crunch (\$10) offered textural diversity and a variety of temperatures. The fall flavors and sweet toffee had me begging for more.

From the moment you pull up to the front entrance, everything about the Washington Duke Inn exudes Southern elegance and ease. Not only is Chef Cunningham crafting some of the best seasonally inspired dishes in the Triangle, he also created the best meal I’ve had this year. 🍴

Brian is a food writer, culinary instructor, and chef. His business, Love at First Bite, specializes in private cooking classes and intimate dinners. For more information, please visit www.loveatfirstbite.net. Contact Brian at brian@welovedowntown.com.



The pan roasted Cobia was perfectly seared, flaky and succulent.

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