

Life CHESAPEAKE

Oxford's Robert Morris Inn

An old favorite reopens in Oxford, but are the crab cakes just as good as the ones author James Michener famously adored?

By Mary K. Zajac

Photographs by Scott Suchman

Robert Morris Inn

314 N. Morris St., Oxford, Md.

410-226-5111

<http://www.robertmorrisinn.com>

Open: Breakfast, Mon.-Sat.; brunch, Sun.; lunch and dinner, daily

ATMOSPHERE: Old-fashioned, historic

SERVICE: Gracious and accommodating

DON'T MISS: Taste of the Chesapeake; Maryland crab cake

TARIFF: Appetizers, \$9-\$14; entrees, \$26-\$32



For 1 1/2 years, Oxford's Robert Morris Inn has been an empty, lonely place. But no longer. In May 2010, chef Mark Salter and his friend and business partner, Ian Fleming, both formerly of The Inn at Perry Cabin, stepped in and revived the shuttered inn. Today, new trees dot the property, the car park has been regraded, and beer once again flows in the Morris' cozy tavern.

Those looking for change since the new ownership will find it only in the menus and in the "crochery and cutlery," as British-born Salter puts it. The tavern retains its gorgeous brick walls and dark wood warmth, and the formal dining room retains its staid, Colonial décor. At present, Salter plans to leave the dining room as is, though, the future may bring some tweaks. Many won't mind, but the room's distinct old-fashioned-ness feels tired and somewhat at odds with Salter's food, which is a fresher and more modern take on classic.



On Salter's formal dining room menu (which overlaps somewhat with the tavern menu), cream of Maryland crab soup shares space with tuna carpaccio, and quinoa and poppadoms accompany seared jumbo scallops. A Maryland crab spring roll appetizer is a play of delicate flavors and textures where toasted almonds provide the crunch, ripe avocado and crab give creaminess, and slivers of tart pink grapefruit prevent the whole dish from being too rich.

A Taste of the Chesapeake, another playful starter, samples seasonal favorites: a perfectly fried oyster accompanied by a demitasse of subtly spiced butternut squash soup and a generous dab of smoky bluefish paté, an underrated fish that's showing up more and more on restaurant menus these days. (Am I happy about this? You betcha!)

Entrees also cull from what's local and in season, like rockfish and duck breast, lamb shank and oysters (Salter plans to change the menu four times a year). Ask Salter what makes his crab cake so good, and he'll tell you "love," without missing a beat. But press him further about his award-winning recipe (in a recent contest, Salter bested chef Eric Ripert of Manhattan's swank Le Bernadin with this crab cake), and he'll admit that panko coating and local crabmeat, often hand-picked the same day it's made into the cakes, are crucial parts of the recipe, too. And the crab cake is good—softball sized, but light as a balloon, served with carrot ginger puree and French beans. (It's also a pricey \$29.) Equally nice is the generous tenderloin of beef, which comes with dauphinoise potatoes and sautéed mushrooms begging to be sampled.



Just make sure you save room for dessert. All are made in-house, including a multi-layered Smith Island cake, but if you love chocolate, you can't go wrong with the chocolate-enrobed Ailsa's chocolate carrot cake with its ribbon of creamy filling between the layers.

Although Salter emphasizes that the inn offers "casual fine dining," be aware that this is not inexpensive dining, with most entrees lying firmly in the upper-\$20 range. The prices are a shade lower in the livelier tavern, which boasts a smaller and more casual menu, and I would definitely plan my next meal there. Besides, what's better than reconnecting with an old friend?

Food writer Mary K. Zajac eats all over the Bay.
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