



Restaurant review: Mark Salter revives Robert Morris Inn with inspirational cuisine

The chef's move from St. Michaels puts village on travel-dining map

October 22, 2010 By Richard Gorelick, The Baltimore Sun

Mark Salter had a good 17-year run at the Inn at Perry Cabin in St. Michaels. The British-born chef gathered up a library of glowing reviews, both for his cooking and for his proprietorship of the luxury property, and evolved into something of a celebrity — and this was before the days of the celebrity chef. In recent years, Mark Salter and Sherwood's Landing, the luxury property's main restaurant, seemed to recede into the background.

Then, in May, Salter crossed the Tred Avon River into Oxford, where he took over the historic Robert Morris Inn. The original building, the home of Robert Morris, dates to 1710. George Washington visited often, and James Michener outlined his novel "Chesapeake" while staying here. In a short time, Salter and his partners have impressively restored the original building and its annexes, long known for their Colonial ambience.

Can I tell you a secret? I hate Colonial ambience. In a recurring nightmare, a tour guide dressed in period Colonial costume is making me look at wainscoting.

So I'm pretty sure that's why I loved every minute at the Robert Morris Inn. This is a real place for real people, and on a recent Saturday night, weekenders and local residents were coming in for the excellent food and for a good time, too. There are two main dining options. Casual dining is intended for the wood-paneled, slate-floor tavern and taproom. Formal dining takes place in room that looks absolutely ready for it — chandeliers, valences, tablecloths.

So of course we ate in the tavern. (Actually, we should have chosen the taproom, which has a working fireplace and perfect dimensions.) But we did so only after carefully comparing the menus for casual and formal dining and seeing how much overlap there was. Just about everything we wanted on the formal dining menu was available on the casual menu, with minor modifications.

Thus, we did not miss out on perfect fried oysters, just about the best I've ever met, with the oyster perfectly preserved under a firm, minimally seasoned coating. It signals the kind of cooking that knows when less is more — what elevated it beyond the homespun was a finely tuned citrus remoulade. Nor did we lose out on a meltingly satisfying bluefish- and crab cake, served with a Meyer lemon remoulade and topped, rather stunningly, with a fried egg.

Again, Salter is helping native flavors speak for themselves. He does this too with a creamy butternut squash soup — here, it's careful and knowledgeable spicing, as cardamom and ginger greet but don't assault the senses.

Recommended as well was a smoked bluefish pate, served with homemade whole wheat toasts, and — this hardly ever happens — enough of them to accommodate the whole pate.

How does this entree grab you? A grilled tenderloin of beef with blue cheese and black pepper butter, Dauphinoise potatoes, wild mushrooms and nutmeg spinach. It's better than it sounds. The potatoes, glorious and creamy, in particular will remind you of the kind of fine dining they've told us no longer exists. Salter's award-winning crab cake is on the menu, served with a carrot-ginger puree, autumn squash and sauteed green beans. I admire the flavor focus of Salter's crab cakes, but it is notably not lumpy, so if that's something you insist on, you'll be disappointed.

A nonmeat option — two slices from a goat cheese and potato terrine, one topped with fig chutney, the other with tomatoes — is a lovely way of considering the needs and tastes of vegetarians. It was lovely to look at, and as satisfying and nourishing as the meat entrees.

Only the fish and chips failed to fully satisfy us; I don't think rockfish works in this genre. But the fries are grand, and so are the pretty English peas.

For dessert, the inn was offering two outstanding variations of Smith Island Cake: one with ginger, almond and apricot, and a more traditional version with coconut and lemon.

This was a great evening. The service in the tavern was perfectly pitched, friendly but very professional. The Robert Morris has a sister inn in Scotland, which explains the occasional Glaswegian accent among the staff, not to mention the impressive scotch collection. Also, know that Salter won awards for his wine list at Perry Cabin.

The inn is running a leisure special through early April. It includes breakfast and a dinner in the taproom or tavern. Even with a two-night minimum, it's a don't-miss offer. I don't like to tell people what to do, but basically, if you don't jump on this one, you're nuts.

Where: 314 N. Morris St.,

Contact: 410-226-5111, robertmorrisinn.com

Hours: Open for breakfast, lunch, and dinner seven days a week

Prices: Appetizers, \$8-\$14 Entrees, \$16-\$32

Food: ★ ★ ★ 1/2

Service: ★ ★ ★ 1/2

Atmosphere: ★ ★ ★ ★

[Key: Outstanding: ★ ★ ★ ★; Good: ★ ★ ★; Fair or Uneven: ★ ★; Poor: ★]