

Dining Out: Epoch at The Exeter Inn-New!

Epoch offers delicious, creative farm-to-table food

By **Rachel Forrest**

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Epoch evolves. The restaurant that until a few years ago was a dowdy, musty uninspired room with equally uninspired food became an elegant yet cozy hip restaurant with one of the hottest lounges around in a cool boutique hotel in 2008.

The food was good then, but now it's even better thanks to the talents of new Chef Ben Hasty, who has hired some of the more creative chefs and most hospitable front of the staff on the Seacoast. It's out of the box farm-to-table fare that honors New England taste but brings it to new, delicious levels.

DINING OUT: EPOCH AT THE EXETER INN

www.epochrestaurant.com

Hours: Breakfast, lunch and dinner daily

Food **** and a half. Inspired farm to table fare with bright flavors and exotic textures

Service **** and a half. Some of the best front of the house pros around.

Ambience ****. Modern and comfortable class

Overall . ****. and a half. Indulge yourself with delicious creative and down-to-earth cuisine in uplifting supper club setting.

***** - Excellent

Enter and have a creative cocktail at the bar or in the lounge. It's a grown-up spot for grown-up drinks and wine. Beer, even. There's an air of swank, but no expectation of fussy or dressy and the dining room with its touches of mod and subdued, hip decor is the same. I love to sit in one of the banquettes — I feel like I'm in an episode of "Mad Men," but just on the edge of the modern art era. The waitstaff and management are pros, which adds to the grown-up vibe (though kids will be fine here with a casual menu as well). Most will remember Hasty from The Dunaway and he's brought some folks from there and some of the staff I respect from other Portsmouth restaurants as well.

Todd Cary is wine director and manager and Kate Jurdi from The Dolphin Striker is here and David Pettengil is here as well. Jamieson, the bartender can help you choose a cocktail — he was at the Wentworth. As you can see, this is one of the few times I've been able to refer to front of the house staff in detail — professionals all.



In the kitchen with Hasty, chefs who were at 98 Provence, Arrows, Massimo's. It all adds up to a stellar crew up front and in back, which brings us to the food. There's an opportunity to just let the chef take you away in a four, six or grand tasting menu at great prices (\$35, \$55 and \$80) and I say go for it. Try, taste, indulge. You'll get new flavors and dishes you've never had before. But if you don't want to go there, the menu is divided into four sections, apps, salad and chilled, soups and entrees, some of which can be ordered in half portions.

We had a feast to try many of the dishes. House cured salmon is lightly smoky, lightly sweet with a soft poached local egg for richness and tender baby spinach for texture (\$7). Crispy braised pork breast also comes with a soft poached egg to mingle into crisp tickly frisee greens, the three cubes of pork crisp, then smooth with fat, then meaty (\$10). We also shared one of the dishes from the entree list, a special of handmade tagliatelle carbonara style with truffle oil, lardon, mushrooms, bacon and cream then topped with a coddled egg to break over it all and mix in (\$17). The pasta is springy and light, the dish rich and decadent. And don't worry, not every dish has eggs but I love how they are used in each dish.

One in our party, Friend Vicky, ordered the four-course chef's choice meal and she got some herb rich blood sausage with a hit of spice and a terrific coarse texture. Next for her was a mild bright white hake with the juxtaposition of hot chorizo and light fish broth. A Caesar salad is simple and crisp with plump white anchovies crossed on top along with buttery croutons (\$10).

A dish of chicken two ways included a savory sage sausage with slow cooked breast, oozing with natural juices into a fiery harissa emulsion. (19). They make their own sausages here including sopressata and bresoala. The chef is a whiz at duck so I had the Long Island duck a L'Orange, the breast griddled with a crunch in the sweet and earthy skin that hinted of both sweet orange and some more exotic Asian spices. A square potato cake accompanied the breast and confit leg, fall off the bone tender (\$26). Dishes like yellow fin tuna with Kalamata olives are available in half or full orders as is a pan roasted organic salmon with bacon, sweet fennel and a Bearnaise emulsion, the chunks of pink fish crisp on top yet moist and dense inside, all on top of earthy turnip (\$16 half). There's much more. I've had sweetbreads here as a part of the chef's choice plan that were perfectly cooked .

There's a nosh menu as well for the bar/lounge and if you'd like a burger with hand cut fries or other creative casual fare then do it. It's a hotel so anything goes in terms of which menu you use so don't worry about the entree factor and feel free to make an appetizer an entree.

For dessert we tried dishes that were lighter rather than too much for the end of a meal that involved many dishes and flavors. An apple tart is encased in pastry that flakes lightly into the mouth, the apples smooth and spicy and a crepe filled with sweet goat cheese was a great finish to our decadence.



Cocktails are creative here, but do not miss the wine from a list created by Todd Cary. And please, ask him what to try. He knows just how to pair the wine not only with your food, but with your own personal preferences. This is, after all, dining for grown-ups in every way from great service to lovely ambience but it's also dining for grown-ups who want to try some of our locally sourced cuisine in combinations that are both whimsical and down-to-earth from a young man who grew up on a farm and brings all his talent to the table at Epoch.

Rachel Forrest is a former restaurant owner who lives in Portsmouth. Her column appears Wednesdays in Go&Do. Her restaurant review column, Dining Out, appears Thursdays in Spotlight magazine. Hear her on Wine Me Dine Me on alternate Wednesdays on WSCA-FM 106.1. She can be reached by e-mail at rachel.forrest@dowjones.com.