

Dining Out:

By **TERRA WALTERS**, for **The Capital**

Icy blasts, icy roads, wind-chill factors. All around us, winter blankets the region with a bleak and pewter aspect. Yet, amid all this, young womens' hearts turn to thoughts of ... WEDDINGS!?!

Weddings, outdoors by the water in an idyllic and bucolic spot. Weddings with lots of places for photo ops and on-site accommodations for out-of-town guests. Weddings on grassy lawns under white lattice bowers.

WHAT: Kent Manor Inn and Restaurant

WHERE: 500 Kent Manor Drive, Stevensville

PHONE: 410-643-7716 or 1-800-820-4511

WEB SITE: www.kentmanor.com

HOURS: Lunch: 11 a.m.-4 p.m. Thursday-Saturday. Dinner: 5-9 p.m. Thursday-Saturday. Sunday brunch: 10 a.m.-2 p.m.

EXECUTIVE CHEF: William Lackey

APPETIZERS: \$3-\$18

ENTRÉES: \$26-\$29

CREDIT CARDS: All major cards accepted

RESERVATIONS: Accepted and recommended

HANDICAPPED ACCESS: Yes

Promise one thing: When you check out the Kent Manor Inn, which is indeed the quintessential embodiment of all those characteristics, check out the restaurant as well and you will see for yourself that Kent Manor Inn is first and foremost an outstanding place to dine.

The fact that it would make an ideal venue for everything from weddings to receptions to corporate conferences and family reunions is just incidental. Whether you're there at lunch time (try the Dual Oyster Po'Boys with Chipotle mayonnaise and your choice of homemade Old Bay chips, Tuscan cous cous, goat cheese polenta, or roasted potato salad for \$10) or going for dinner, be sure to give Kent Manor Inn an opportunity to show off their new Executive Chef William Lackey.

Chef William, who trained at the prominent Baltimore International College Institute of Culinary Arts, has been busily putting his own vision in place since his arrival last fall. His menu could best be described as modern American cuisine offering contemporary and bay-influenced twists to classic French cuisine.

Over the years, the stunning inn (built on property that was part of a land grant dating

back to the days of Lord Calvert) has alternated between being an inn and a private home. Dating to 1820, the building was expanded just prior to the Civil War and was beautifully restored to its original glory in 1987. It forms a perfect backdrop for the innovative cuisine of Chef William.

It was our first visit (decidedly the first of many) to Kent Manor Inn, and it was made more dramatic by seeing it emerge from the dense fog enshrouding the area that evening. We hurried inside, little knowing what rare treats were in store for us.

Wine connoisseurs and wine novices alike will appreciate the wine list as it includes vintage years and brief descriptions, as well as providing variety in terms of origin and price range. Our choice that evening was the 2002 Penfolds Cabernet Shiraz (\$36) and we enjoyed it both as an aperitif and as an accompaniment to our meal.

Operating under the premise that every serious restaurant in this area deserves a chance to showcase their cream of crab soup, we began with cups of the Kent Manor version (\$4 a cup, \$7 a bowl) and were delighted with the result. It was creamy without being too thick, tasty without being too rich, and impeccably seasoned. The subtle hint of sherry was the perfect punctuation.

Next on our agenda was the Deconstructed Caesar Salad (\$9), which was a fascinating as well as delicious take on that old standard. Composed of grilled hearts of romaine, the Caesar featured crisp bits of apple-smoked bacon, a focaccia crouton and a delectable homemade dressing. Splitting the salad provided plenty for both diners.

Considering that this was a first visit, it behooved us to try as many items as we could and it's always good to know how a kitchen performs with fried foods as there are so many opportunities to miss the mark with frying: too greasy, too much batter, breading that overwhelms, to name a few. The menu description (comes with pancetta, salsify and roasted red pepper vinaigrette) of the fried Chesapeake oysters (\$11) did little to prepare us for the inventively-presented and thoroughly delectable dish. Served on a long and narrow plate, the oysters were crisp on the outside, succulent on the inside and nested atop a smattering of delicious slaw.

So far, in our estimation, the Kent Manor kitchen was batting 1.000 and the arrival of the entrées continued their winning streak.

Both the White Marble Farms pork tenderloin (\$26) and the grilled filet mignon (\$28) got very high marks. Again, presentation was spectacular.

The pork, tender and flavorful, was served with perfect accompaniments in the form of cranberry almond rice and a Calvados apple compote.

The filet, perfectly cooked, came accented with a gorgonzola cheese gratinee and a

pinot noir reduction. The pommes frites were exquisite.

The entrées were generous portions and both diners enjoyed the leftovers the next day.

This is a restaurant where one simply must have dessert and all six items sounded fabulous. Deciding to save the root beer float (homemade root beer, Madagascar vanilla bean ice cream, and Frangelica whipped cream) for warmer weather, we opted for the warm apple tart Tatin (\$7) which was elegant and restrained, allowing the apples to take center stage. Rum raisin ice cream and a rich caramel sauce completed the tableau and pointed up the tart. Yum!

Whether you decide to go to for the amazing Aphrodisiac Menu that Chef William has planned for Valentine's Day this week or just for an escaping-the-winter-blahs getaway, put the Kent Manor Inn on your list.

Be good to yourself – put it at the top.

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