

# Dining Out: Kent Manor serves up a memorable dining experience

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Here are some significant dates in the history of the magnificent Kent Manor Inn:

1697 - Seventeen years after the arrival of Lord Calvert, the property was granted to Thomas Wetherall.

1820 - The first wing of the mansion was constructed.

1843 - Then-owner Sarah Smyth Thompson gave 307 acres to her son Alexander Thompson (the creek adjacent to the inn is still called Thompson's Creek).

1860 - The main portion of the mansion was constructed, adding such elegant appointments as Italian marble fireplace mantels.

1898 - Benjamin Harrison Bright opened a summer hotel called The Brightsworth Inn.

1987 - The Kent Manor Inn was restored to its original beauty, offering a luxurious venue for guest lodgings, conferences, weddings, receptions and other events.

2006 - Chef William Lackey arrives at the Kent Manor Inn.

That last event is the most important as far as local foodies are concerned. Upon his arrival, Chef Lackey, who trained at the celebrated Baltimore International College Institute of Culinary Arts, immediately began to put his indelible stamp on the cuisine, the menu and the wine list. An eclectic blend of classic French cuisine tempered with contemporary American cuisine (and interwoven with elements of Chesapeake Bay seafood preparation) forms the linchpins of the Kent Manor Inn's menu.

From the very beginning, Chef Lackey has demonstrated his knowledge of and respect for the importance of presentation. With every dish, the beauty of the plate offers pleasure before the first taste is taken. Similarly, the beauty of the inn itself - as well as its picturesque setting - forms the perfect backdrop for the food.

Particularly since the arrival of Chef Lackey, the Kent Manor Inn has become a favorite meeting place when getting together with two friends from Delaware. On this particular evening, we gathered to observe the first day of spring, certainly an auspicious occasion to celebrate! We ordered a 2006 Grove Mill Sauvignon Blanc, well-priced (as are most of the wines on this impressive carte) at \$28, and let the fun begin.

First to arrive at the table was Chef Lackey's amuse-bouche (literally "to amuse the mouth" but used to signify a complimentary small bite that begins a meal) and it took the form of a tiny smoked salmon puff pastry with a cucumber relish - a whisper of heaven.

The breads at Kent Manor Inn are definitely worthy of the carb expenditure, one an authentic country loaf and the other a tasty raisin bread. Another one of the "touches" is the tray that accompanies the bread. On the tray are tiny white dishes (visualize dishes for sushi dipping sauces) that hold salt, pepper, high-grade olive oil and pumpkin butter. A most imaginative way of offering those items.

We had all three chosen the prix-fixe dinner, a righteous bargain at \$38 for four courses, and it had all the desired outcomes: We got to taste lots of superb dishes, we had goodies to take home for lunch, and we saved a total of almost \$50 when compared to the individual a la carte prices of the appetizer, salad, entree and dessert components of our meals.

Incidentally, if you choose the prix-fixe menu at Kent Manor Inn, your choices are not in any way limited. (Some restaurants, for their set-price menus, allow you to select only from among the lower-priced dishes.)

Two diners in our group decided to try soup as a first course, with one opting for the luscious chervil oil-infused cream of crab (\$7 a la carte) and the other the soup du jour, which was a lovely lobster bisque that evening. Hard to pick a favorite between those two, but maybe the bisque would get the nod for it was silky on the tongue and the focus - facilitated by the use of an intense and flavorful stock - was completely on the lobster.

The third member of the group decided on the Fried Chesapeake Oysters (\$11 a la carte) and found them to be prepared just the way one would want: savory crunch on the outside and firm briny oysters on the inside. The oysters were served with roasted red pepper vinaigrette accented with salsify and studded with bits of pancetta - it's all about the touches.

The salad course might well have received only perfunctory attention, coming as it did between the spectacular first courses and what we anticipated (correctly, it would turn out) would be similarly impressive entrees. But the fresh and interesting ingredients, lightly dressed with a tasty vinaigrette, allowed the salads to earn their proper amount of respect.

Entree choices were varied with one diner opting for fish, one for shellfish and one for beef. Shared bites confirmed that each had chosen wisely.

The member of the group who chose the Crispy Skinned Chesapeake Rockfish (\$27 a la carte) was presented a sizeable and succulent filet of rockfish served atop an inspired creation called lobster chorizo bread pudding. Important supporting roles were played by the black bean relish and a charred tomato cream with cilantro. Exquisite.

The Grilled Filet Mignon (\$29 a la carte) was similarly received, with oohs and ahs, and particular appreciation for the accompanying gorgonzola gratinee and mashed potatoes with celery root. With a kitchen of this caliber, the quality and expert preparation of the meat are a given. That means the accompaniments provide the wow factor, and these did that handsomely. Providing taste and color contrast was a cabernet reduction with crispy shallots. Everything about this dish worked.

In our area, everyone has their own opinion (and preference) when it comes to crab cakes. However, a poll would probably indicate that most people think less is more when it comes to crab cakes. If you fall into that category, you'd love the Manor House Crab Cakes (\$30 a la carte) at Kent Manor Inn. Pretty much nothing but top-quality crabmeat held together with positive thinking and prayer. Chef Lackey ups the ante with a little tumbler of roasted sweet corn salad, some warm applewood bacon and a delectable crawfish bechamel. The crab cake that went home for next-day lunch was devoured, cold, in solitary splendor.

Always looking for a way to justify dessert? Just order the prix-fixe menu and then you can spin it by saying, "I paid for it so I might as well eat it."

However you choose to rationalize having dessert at Kent Manor Inn, do it. With a lot of kitchens, you can figure out which courses a chef prefers to focus on because those are the ones that have more elan and show more vision.

But in Chef Lackey's kitchen, I defy anyone to figure out which course is the teacher's pet, for he's still going strong when it comes to desserts. Again we shared bites and once more each endorsed all three selections.

Think a Root Beer Float sounds pedestrian? Think again. This one (\$8 a la carte) boasts a tiny mug of homemade root beer ready to pour over homemade Madagascar vanilla bean ice cream and a fluff of frangelica whipped cream to add finishing touches.

The second member of the group chose the Warm Granny Smith Apple Funnel Cake (\$9 a la carte) and declared it (and its accompanying Calvados syrup and apple cranberry compote) mightily swoon-worthy.

It can't get any better than this? Oh, yes it can. Taking honors was the Creme Brulee Tasting of Three (\$8 a la carte). Beautifully presented, these three were all super. One was a blood orange vanilla with effervescent orange sugar, the second was roasted pineapple ginger snap with macadamia nut brittle, and the third was a mirabelle hazelnut with raspberry and a white chocolate tuile. Could it possibly taste as good as it sounds? Yes, and then some.

Spring is here and Annapolitans are ready to head over the bridge once more. Next time you do, take the first exit after the bridge, turn south on Route 8 for a couple of hundred yards, turn left just before the service station, and proceed to a most memorable dining experience. Hats off to the Kent Manor Inn.