



Beachgoers and business-people know where to head for fine dining in a relaxed, elegant space.

coastal *gourmet*

This Wilmington restaurant bridges the gap between surf and turf, port and land.

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One look at the menu at Port Land Grille, and you get it — the name's clever play on words, with the comingling of surf and turf, and the playful attitude of mixing up local with global. But there's even more to the name.

Located in Wilmington, North Carolina's largest port, Port Land Grille is a short reach from the Wrightsville Beach drawbridge in Lumina Station. As expected, there's seafood,

like crab cakes, grouper, or scallops.

Other tempting entrees feed off the land, like spring lamb, pork, and antelope. "We sell the most antelope in the U.S.," says chef/owner Shawn Wellersdick, who likes to throw uncommon ingredients in what he calls a "progressive regional American" style of cooking. The pork is grown, sustainably, in North Carolina. So are the accompanying sweet potatoes. "He has an ethnic frame of mind, using



what's local," says his business partner and wife, Anne Steketee, who manages the front of the house and the wine list.

Same sweet potato, different presentation

Like many of today's conscientious chefs, Wellersdick plays up the farm-to-table connection and identifies the source of the main ingredients. Local foods play a starring role on his menu, as do local, seasonal specialties like soft-shell crabs. Wellersdick is friends with the farmers who supply him with produce and only chooses meats raised naturally, humanely, and sustainably. He sniffs and tastes each box of food brought to his kitchen, and if it's not the quality he expects, out it goes.

The result is a diverse, yet thoughtful, menu that truly delights. Hawaiian yellowfin tuna partners with Johnson County sweet potatoes — not mashed in a typical Southern style but blended into a sauce that also contains coconut, peanut, and green curry paste. For Mongolian-style pork chops, sweet potatoes are hashed and served with a chutney made from local Lewis Farm blueberries and a sweet and tangy, balsamic plum barbecue jus. Pork cheeks are paired with wild mushrooms and fresh ramps, while a rabbit tarte is served warm with smoky blue cheese and cipollini onions.

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In-flight insight

The inspiration for this style of cooking comes from Wellersdick's training and the restaurants he and Steketee enjoyed while on a West Coast expedition, fishing for a new place to call home. Wellersdick studied culinary arts at Johnson & Wales University in Providence, Rhode Island, and trained in New York City before working his way to executive chef at Noble's in Greensboro. Steketee worked her way through Guilford College into managing Southern Lights Bistro and Bar. From there they were lured to a new restaurant in downtown Wilmington, Under Currant. But that partnership failed. So they regrouped and thought Portland, Oregon, might be a fun place to try their own restaurant. Folks in the business out there talked them out of it.

Back to Wilmington they went, still determined to open a restaurant. On the way home, Wellersdick sketched out the concept for a new place on an airplane barf bag. No gas grill, only wood and charcoal. Local ingredients, of course, but also quality products from across the country. Seasonal, with a menu that changes a couple of times a week. A creative edge to the food, with excellent presentation. And wine-friendly, Steketee added, along with comfortable and casual.

BY LAND OR BY SEA: Husband-and-wife team Sean Wellersdick and Anne Steketee (top left) opened Port Land Grille (bottom left) in 2000, surprising customers with dishes ranging from antelope to local soft-shell crab.



They didn't want a special occasion place. And the name? Why not a take off of Portland?

Port Land Grille was launched in 2000 and has been gathering accolades ever since. Steketee's wine selections, almost exclusively from the United States, have earned them the prestigious DiRoNA award and the *Wine Spectator* Award of Excellence. She gets a kick out of greeting regular patrons and visiting tourists, who seem to enjoy the cozy, "old supper club" atmosphere she created.

You may want a redneck eggroll if ...

A look at the menu shows that Wellersdick has fun in the kitchen. Take the redneck eggroll, made with North Carolina-style pulled pork barbecue, and mac and cheese, gussied up with roasted leeks and crispy pancetta. Or smoked pimento cheese butter that's one of the optional toppings for steaks and chops, as well as the more traditional hunter's sauce with porcini mushrooms and port.

His real gift as a chef, claims his wife, is his ability to balance a dish. "You may be able to identify each ingredient, but they're all in harmony, with no flavors fighting with each other," says Steketee. That also makes his food easier to pair with wine.

Wellersdick's brother, Shane, is the pastry chef, creating a gargantuan coconut cake that's to die for, along with other delights such as crême brûlée, tarts, and cakes featuring seasonal fruits.

Weather permitting, diners can enjoy the outdoor terrace near the fountains and pond of Lumina Station. And you can bet they're as happy as Wellersdick and Steketee that the Port Land Grille wound up on North Carolina's coast. □

ROASTED DOUBLE-CUT PORK CHOP

with curried North Carolina sweet potato, dried cherry, and blue cheese salad

- 1 large raw sweet potato (to yield about 4 cups), peeled and chopped into ½-inch dice
- 1 medium onion (yields about 1 cup), diced
- 1 medium red bell pepper (yields about ¾ cup), diced
- 2 slices of hardwood smoked bacon, julienned
- 1 ½ teaspoons Madras curry powder
- 1 ½ tablespoons olive oil
- 2 ounces orange juice
- 1 ounce cider vinegar
- 1 cup dried cherries
- ½ cup crumbled blue cheese
- ½ cup diced green onions (greens only)
- ½ cup toasted walnuts
- 2 teaspoons sea or kosher salt (plus more for chops)
- 1 teaspoon ground black pepper (plus more for chops)
- 4 each thick-cut (1 ½ inch) pork rib chops

Toss together the sweet potatoes, onions, bacon, and red peppers with olive oil and curry powder. Place mixture into an ovenproof dish, and cover with foil. Bake at 375° for 50 minutes. Remove from oven, and let cool about 30 minutes. Once mixture has cooled, add the dried cherries, walnuts, blue cheese, orange juice, green onions, cider vinegar, and salt and pepper, and mix ingredients until well incorporated. Let stand at room temperature until plating, or this can be done ahead and warmed in baking dish before service.

Liberal season the pork chops with sea salt and ground black pepper. Preheat oven temperature to 400°. In a heavy bottomed, ovenproof skillet (that is large enough to hold all 4 pork chops with an inch or so between), add 1 tablespoon of olive oil, bring pan to a high heat, and sear the pork chops for 2 minutes on each side, watching the color. Once they reach a golden brown, flip the pork chops, and repeat. Place entire pan in 400° oven, and roast for 20 minutes. Let rest for 5 minutes before serving. Divide sweet potato salad between 4 plates, place 1 pork chop on each plate, and serve with a side of your favorite chutney.

Yields four generous servings.



Port Land Grille

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With years in the restaurant business, Chef Shawn Wellersdick knows North Carolina fine dining. Log on to dish.ncsignature.com for his local recommendations.