

PORT LAND GRILLE



During winter, and especially during the holiday season, casual, lighter restaurant meals often are more appealing than big dinners, which people tend to eat with friends or family at home. For multiple small plates, there is no place better than Port Land Grille. In my reviews for the Greensboro News and Record, I have cited this property as one of the best restaurants in the state. It is one of only a handful of North Carolina restaurants that have been recognized by DiRona (Distinguished Restaurants of North America); numerous other honors and press clippings decorate the walls.

Seating is provided on wicker and wrought iron chairs. The ambience is breezy and coastal casual, yet upscale. An open kitchen and bar separate two dining areas. Private dining rooms are available as well.

Aromas from a wood-fired grill first catch my attention whenever I dine here. The menu is wide-ranging – two full pages, plus a third for steaks and chops. Original touches abound, applied to mostly local seafoods and vegetables and free-range meats. Presentations range from simply striking to downright spectacular, yet never straying into precious. The wine list is exceptional, yet reasonably priced.

After perusing the menu, members of our party began to argue over what to order. That's a good sign. Whole grain bread, coated with poppy seeds and sesame seeds, accompanied by quality olive oil, helped sooth us as we debated.

Caramelized Cauliflower and Gruyere Cheese Veloute (\$8) is one of the most richly rewarding soups I've ever tasted. "Shake and Bake" Fries (\$6) are made from sweet potatoes, tossed in truffle oil, dusted with shredded Parmesan cheese and served with roasted red pepper Dijon mayonnaise. Though low in price, they are high in flavor.

Fried Ipswich Clams (\$10) are brought in from Massachusetts, where the cold waters are famous for ensuring fresh flavors in seafoods. A delightful, crisp crust did not obscure the flavor of the clams, and

thin strips of fried lemon peel, along with strips of fresh basil, further enhanced flavor. Tartar sauce lent accent.

Tsar Nicoulai Smoked White Sturgeon (\$14) is subtle, decorated with truffled Tiger Eye Caviar, graced on the side with fennel pollen and lemon crème fraiche, well complemented by horseradish fingerling potato salad, lemon oil and pickled ramp bulbs. Black Mussels (\$10) are prepared Portuguese style, in crushed and simmered tomatoes, with grilled sausage, peppers, fresh basil, roasted garlic and saffron, interspersed with pastry shells.

Slices of #1 Big-Eye Tuna Tuna Tartare (\$12) are layered over couscous, molded into a formed cylinder. Citrus tobiko caviar is scattered over the top. A sweet and sour cucumber relish, ginger candied almonds and dabs of siracha crème fraiche lend decoration as well as flavor. House-made sea salt potato chips, dark fried crisp, round out the presentation.

Rabbit Tarte (\$14) combines tender rabbit meat with almost caramelized roasted shallots, wild mushrooms, walnuts and pancetta, accented with aged balsamic vinegar. This is served with dabs of warm, smoked blue cheese plus cipollini onions and Pommery mustard. On a winter night with a glass of pinot noir, this is sublime.

A sliced Pate (\$9) blends chicken, duck and rabbit livers with Cognac and pistachio nuts, accented with quince preserves. Capers, cornichons, diced red onions and whole grain mustard are the condiments. Pulled Pork Barbecue, prepared in-house, is served in the form of Sliders (\$10), and is covered with Tillamook aged cheddar pimiento cheese, with chow chow and pepper jelly alongside. Confit of Cured Pork Belly (\$10) is based on thick bacon. The slices join white flageolet beans, onions and smoked duck sausage to create a deeply flavorful, personal interpretation of cassoulet.

I love to eat this way, with multiple small courses. Two of these selections from the starter section of the menu, or one with a salad, would constitute an excellent, light, relatively inexpensive meal. It's a great way to save money, while still dining at the highest level.

Desserts, dessert wines, cheeses and single malt scotches require a separate, two-page menu. Vanilla Bean and Espresso Crème Brulée (\$8) is a custardy version, dark from the coffee, with Chantilly cream and cinnamon cookies surrounded by raspberries and blackberries. Not Your Ordinary Coconut Cake (\$8) with pistachio Anglaise is spectacularly tall, the cake soaked through with coconut milk.

Owner-chef Shawn Wellersdick is a Johnson and Wales graduate. He and his wife, Anne Stekete, moved to Wilmington almost 10 years ago from Greensboro, where he was chef of the Greensboro Noble's (RIP) and she was manager of Southern Lights. She manages the floor and is in charge of the restaurant's wine program. Shane Wellersdick, Shawn's brother, is pastry chef and has a pastry degree from the Connecticut Culinary Institute.

An evening at Port Land Grille is an ideal Holiday gift to friends or to yourself!

In addition to his work with Focus on the Coast, John Batchelor has been reviewing restaurants for the Greensboro News and Record for over 25 years. He and his unindicted co-conspirators dine anonymously; restaurants are not notified in advance that they are being reviewed. You may e-mail him at john.e.batchelor@gmail.com.

PORT LAND GRILLE

1908 Eastwood Road
Lumina Station
Wilmington
910-256-6056

www.portlandgrille.com

Open for dinner at 5:30 p.m. Monday-Saturday

Reservations accepted

Credit cards: Visa, MC, AmEx, Discover

ABC permits: All

Handicapped facility: All seating on entry level

