

Say Cheese! Our Free-Wheeling Guide

Indianapolis

MONTHLY

74 Reasons to Love Downtown!

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MARCH 2008 \$4.95



Down Home, Upscale

Meridian takes Indy's culinary history in a decidedly tasty direction.

BY TERRY KIRTS

We started with oysters Rockefeller, a dish so steeped in tradition you can almost taste it before it hits the table. Spinach, bacon, and breadcrumbs all broiled and bubbling right there in the shells. You know it, right?

Well, we thought we did, too. But at Meridian, where Indy's culinary history has been so elegantly updated you have to scratch your head to remember it, things are a little different. Here, the oysters were freed from their shells, dusted ever so lightly with a spicy, fried chicken-style coating, and dunked a minute in the deep fryer. Anchored on dollops of creamed spinach, drizzled (not drenched) with Hollandaise, and accessorized with lardons of smoky bacon as well as a kicky homemade sweet chili sauce, these oysters were a little like your favorite old sofa recovered in gorgeous new Italian upholstery—familiar but so much better. So much more delicious for the updating.

It was an apt introduction to what must be the city's most striking restaurant restoration in recent memory. Even if you never stopped in for fried chicken or chocolate-chip pie at the old Dodd's Townhouse, you surely passed by on a summer evening to see regulars out for a family dinner at this longtime Hoosier institution. Partners Steve Berg, Tom Megenhardt, and Rick Lux, whose restaurant credits include casual Binkley's and downtown favorite the Elbow Room, didn't take lightly their new ownership of the spot that has housed restaurants since the 1920s. They oversaw the transformation down to the original 1880s log cabin and back again to a sleek contemporary eatery with the warmth of a ski lodge and the hominess of a neighborhood haunt—with plenty of white linen. Are there perhaps one too many simulated melting-candle lamps lighting the place? Maybe, but you would be hard-pressed to find a more comfortable, inviting dining space in town.

Just as central a figure to the planning and reimagining of the place has been executive chef Dan Dunville, a congenial but exacting manager-chef who can be seen around the place at all hours. No absentee chef is he. A veteran of several high-profile kitchens, including Dunaway's, Broad Ripple Steakhouse, and Ruth's Chris Steak House in Carmel, he's finally been given complete creative control at Meridian, and his foresight, innovation, and professionalism show. His staff is especially on the ball and accommodating. They have to be. So anticipated was the restaurant's reopening that the place was serving nearly 150 diners a night the second week it was open. Reservations are essential, even sometimes for lunch, and the modest parking lot can't handle the crowds.

Far from radicalizing culinary tradition, Dunville has created a menu that playfully updates classics while offering just enough



Lamb loin with chickpea cake and eggplant puree



gastronomic novelty to satisfy a wide range of tastes. Crabcakes, Caesar salads, and New York strips coexist with such dishes as barramundi, a luscious Australian fish served with soba noodles and a light lime broth. Among more-familiar starters, the beef carpaccio is perfectly cut and presented, though an acidic contrast might be nice. Tender but far from mushy potato gnocchi take on tons of flavor from sweet, well-roasted tomatoes, sage, and balsamic. Good old Indiana corn gets surprisingly upscale treatment in an utterly smooth puree with a nice hit of pepper and bacony undertones. A tuna "poke," a Hawaiian riff on tuna tartare, is a neat pile of barely seared tuna served with a Technicolor contrast of sweet and sharp garnishes: a paint stroke of sweet ponzu, a puddle of wasabi, fine threads of cucumber. It's as appealing to the eye as to the mouth.

Dunville, a compulsive condiment-maker who keeps jars of his own spicy concoctions in his home pantry, rarely sauces just once, and his application of colors and textures across the white space of plates can be arresting. Tender lamb loin isn't just plunked on a starch but paired with a chickpea cake, smoky eggplant puree, and cooling tzatziki. Every bite is different. Perhaps most surprising is how a pedestrian chicken breast can be so succulent and juicy, made earthy with a mushroom fricassee

and hunks of a slightly crunchy biscuit. Rustic but with no lack of class.

Sunday-brunch dishes are also quite consistent but allow for the slightest quibbling. House-smoked salmon is deeply flavored, but the table divided over a sweet onion marmalade substituted for typical raw onions. Smoked pork loin, not Canadian bacon, didn't quite cut it against a very lemony hollandaise on eggs Benedict, but the dish is enviably rich. Mammoth brioche French toast and crispy blueberry-drenched griddlecakes got few complaints.

Never wanting to get bored in one station, Dunville also doubles as pastry chef, injecting just as much mischief into his desserts. By far the most nostalgic are the doughnuts and coffee, mini rings served with a creamy malted coffee sauce in a mug for dipping. These could have been fried a minute longer, but I was reduced to a wide-eyed child when I opened the bag to a whiff of hot-doughnut steam. A tall sundae glass of butterscotch pudding was a tad grainy and needed an accompaniment with more contrast than its shortbread-cookie companion. A pie-like filling of apples and kiwi in tender phyllo with ice cream might have had a pinch too much cinnamon, overpowering the kiwi. But updating a classic takes the finest of touches, and so many things are working already at Meridian. It's no wonder diners are clamoring for a taste of the city's changing culinary heritage. ●



Doughnuts with coffee sauce

MERIDIAN

5694 N. Meridian St., 466-1111, meridianonmeridian.com

HOURS Mon.–Thurs. 11 a.m.–2:30 p.m., 5–9:30 p.m.; Fri.–Sat. 11 a.m.–2:30 p.m., 5–10:30 p.m.; Sun. 10 a.m.–2:30 p.m.

CUISINE Riffs on comfort-food favorites, steakhouse fare, and updated classics mark Chef Dan Dunville's most creative and playful menu to date.

PRICES Lunch entrees \$8.75 to \$13.50; dinner appetizers \$9.75 to \$11.75; main courses \$20.50 to \$33.50; sides \$5.50; desserts \$6.75 to \$8.75; wines by the glass \$7 to \$14.

ATMOSPHERE The one-time log cabin has been restored to much of its original character and updated for the 21st century with a spiffy bar. There's plenty of dark wood, a stone hearth, and windows overlooking the neighborhood.

PEDIGREE Partners Rick Lux, Steve Berg, and Tom Megenhardt's resume of restaurants includes pubs such as Broad Ripple Tavern and the Elbow Room, as well as Binkley's and Fishers institution the Nickel Plate Bar & Grill.

SERVICE The polished staff does surprisingly well at making the throngs of diners feel at home. The kitchen can sometimes back up, but servers are quick to check up on diners and offer recommendations. Free valet parking is available. Look for outdoor seating in a few weeks.

A PERFECT MEAL

TABLE

A corner table tucked near the roaring fireplace

APPETIZER

Barely seared tuna poke with sweet ponzu, a whiff of wasabi, and cooling cucumbers

ENTREE

The juiciest chicken around, with wild mushrooms and bites of buttermilk biscuit

DRINK

A glass of suave yet versatile La Crema pinot noir, perfect for any part of the meal

DESSERT

Doughnuts and "coffee," a thick malted sauce for dipping

