

MERIDIAN
ADDS UPSCALE
TOUCH TO
DOWNHOME
LOCATION

By LARRY SHORES
PHOTOS BY KYLE EVENS



Some of the many appetizers created by Chef Dan Dunville for Meridian Restaurant & Bar: The Perfect Appetizer (top), Bibb Salad (above) and Tuna Poke (left).

TASTY
Transformation

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Meridian Restaurant & Bar Executive Chef and General Manager, Dan Dunville.

Muncie-area diners who once sought out Dodd's Townhouse, formerly a Meridian Street mecca for fried chicken, might not recognize the restaurant's latest culinary identity. The name is simple — Meridian Restaurant & Bar — but the food and dining experience are agreeably and tastefully complex.

The setting

Elegance helps define Meridian, but not the snooty, hoity-toity kind. Instead, it's understated elegance, as provided by white tablecloths and pleasant candlelight that frame a main dining room containing a fireplace that must have come with the 127-year-old building.

It's much like eating in a ski lodge prettied up for fine dining.

Outside, where patio seating is possible, a tranquil park and graceful homes (in Meridian's Historic District) create a peaceful atmosphere.

The fare

Executive chef Dan Dunville, 38, an Indianapolis native, creates dishes that bow to traditional simplicity — Pork Tenderloin, Duck Breast, Free Range Chicken — but lend themselves to unique seasoning and sauces, tasty side dishes and flawless presentation.

Oysters Rockefeller is a perfect example. Dunville's

version of this storied appetizer frees the oysters from their shells, chicken-fries the morsels and serves them with creamed spinach, bits of smoked bacon and not one but two sauces — Hollandaise and sweet chili. It's a delectable combination.

Presentation is just as exciting as taste. Oysters form a diagonal line on the snow-white plate — starting at the 11 o'clock position — and colorful sauces (lemon yellow and burnt orange) enhance the overall image.

Colors also brighten a dish as mundane as roast duck. Meridian's version is served with a potato cake and spinach, along with sauces best described as *Gold Squash and Kiwi Green* in color.

Every bite is different and every entrée is innovative. Numbers are not overwhelming — 11 entrees featured a recent menu, including salmon, pork tenderloin, halibut, lobster, loin of lamb, ribeye and filet steaks and two pasta dishes. Prices ranged from \$20 to \$31.50.

Nine appetizers graced the same menu, some of them unusual. In that category were Grilled Quail (on risotto with jalapeno honey glaze), Lobster Pot Pie, Tuna Poke and Shrimp & Grits. (Muncie food writer Diane Baer, who tried the shrimp dish recently, calls it an inspired choice. "The blend of flavors — smooth, hot and yet subtle — was just right. A bit larger

Meridian

• **Location:** 5694 N. Meridian St., Indianapolis. Just west of Broad Ripple and a few minutes east of Clowes Hall and the Butler University campus.

• **Cuisine:** Updated classics and creative twists on comfort food favorites.

• **Prices:** Lunch entrees \$8.75 to \$13.50; dinner appetizers \$9.75 to \$11.50; main courses \$20.50 to \$31.50; desserts \$3.50 to \$7.75; wines by the glass \$7 to \$14.

• **Hours:** Lunch 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Monday-Saturday; dinner 5 to 9:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday (until 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday; Sunday brunch 10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

• **Service:** Knowledgeable staff, efficient, attentive and able to make diners feel at home. Wheelchair-accessible.

• **Information:** (317) 466-1111; meridianonmeridian.com.

portion would make a great cold-weather entrée.”)

Signature soup at Meridian is Smoked Corn Puree, a delicious concoction featuring a smooth puree with bits of pepper and bacon and featuring Indiana corn.

Dunville swears by fresh ingredients and uses home-grown meats and produce (wax beans and okra are examples) when available. A recent salad specialty combined nine varieties of locally grown tomatoes, varied in color, and topped by a flavorful sherry and red wine balsamic dressing.

Sweets and libations

As befits its secondary image as a comfortable neighborhood haunt, Meridian offers full bar service, including a martini menu (try the Lemondrop) and a full wine list that connoisseurs of white wine will especially enjoy. After-dinner libations abound, including a full complement of coffee drinks.

Desserts are under the watchful eye of Dunville (he doubles as pastry chef). They include the conventional Flourless Chocolate Tart with raspberry coulis (ours could have used more raspberry), Caramelized Banana Tart and a homemade butterscotch pudding.

The most unusual combination is



Outdoor dining is an option at Meridian Restaurant & Bar, which is located along Meridian between 56th and Westview Boulevard in Indianapolis.

“doughnuts and coffee,” a mini variety served with a creamy malted coffee sauce in a mug for dipping.

Desserts are sized for two, so don’t let the price hold you back.

The pedigree

Ownership is a trio of Indianapolis businessmen with past interests in several notable restaurants. One is Tom Megenhardt, a nephew of Muncie’s Betty Kendall, who often takes friends to Meridian.

Before landing in restaurants, Dunville was schooled at Indiana University, where a sidelight was competitive cycling (he finished 10th in the Little 500). He’s also been a photographer, has climbed mountains around the world and enjoyed international cuisine.

What’s more, he doesn’t stay behind a hot stove all day. He’s often seen talking to diners and is willing to part with recipes for some of his tastiest dishes. ☺

Larry Shores is editor of M Magazine.