



Savor/Review: Millwright's Restaurant & Tavern

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Average Reader Rating
★★★★★

In recent decades, certain landmark restaurants have advanced the conversation about food in Connecticut: Jean-Louis in Greenwich with namesake Gerin's "la nouvelle classique" for which he was named the James Beard Foundation's 2006 Best Chef Northeast; Ibiza in New Haven with 2003 Esquire Chef of the Year Luis Bollo's contemporary Spanish fare; Miya's Sushi in New Haven with chef-owner Bun Lai's pioneering work in sustainability; Polytechnic ON20 in Hartford with Noel Jones' precision cooking, pretty plating and flirtation with molecular gastronomy; Still River Café in Eastford with Kara Brooks' seasonal American cuisine utilizing many ingredients grown on the property; and the team at Firebox in Hartford with its "locavore" approach and commitment to community building.

Injecting itself into the conversation is Millwright's Restaurant & Tavern in Simsbury, where chef-owner Tyler Anderson and his talented team appear to be raising the dining experience to new heights of creativity and civility. Anderson says he wanted to create a restaurant where the customers know where the food comes from, adding that he wouldn't have located where he did were it not for the tremendous farms in the area. As I approach Simsbury from the south via Avon's Nod Road through the fertile farmland fronting the Farmington River, the corn exulting to NBA heights, I wonder if I'm passing any of the fields where the food that I'll be eating was grown. Yes, it turns out.

Located in the Hop Brook Mill, which was built in 1680 and recently restored by Landworks

Development, Millwright's is the centerpiece of a mixed-use project that includes offices, townhomes and upscale apartments. Alert restaurant patrons may be drawn down outdoor steps to a zigzagging approach to a scenic overlook, where one could imagine a single breathtaking table perfect for The Bachelor. Everyone else will still enjoy the lumber smell as they enter the causeway outside the restaurant. Some will be tempted to proceed to the covered bridge overlooking the mill waterfall before actually entering the restaurant. From the bridge, they'll be able to spot the bucolic deck where fresh air fanciers can dine above the waterfall.

But the interior of Millwright's is just as compelling, the view overlooking the mill waterfall memorable even at night, thanks to careful lighting. When I visit, the

tavern with much of the original stonework is under construction downstairs, a loft with a demo kitchen and counter seating is under way upstairs, all of which should keep director of operations AJ Aurricchio plenty busy. In the entry, there are historic photos of the mill, jars full of pickled vegetables, and a few old cookbooks. The hostess, carefully tracking reservations and arrivals, greets us and identifies our party before we can even speak. We're seated in the handsome main dining room, where huge hand-hewn support pillars notched with cross beams (some milled here) support a high peaked ceiling from which four chandeliers dangle.

Millwright's service operates on a higher plane from that of most establishments, not surprising in a restaurant Anderson describes as being built on a foundation of respect and positivity (which, of course, comes from the top). "Anyone in a blue shirt is here for you," we're told. Every amenity, and a few we haven't thought of, is provided. For a second, I feared I might get help in the bathroom, not just led from our table to it. In the meantime, I was helped out of my seat, my napkin refolded, and helped back in.

Millwright's wine program, led by Brent Bushong II, is one of Connecticut's best. Not your usual selections, bottles are arranged by wine characteristic and range from \$27 to \$115. Twenty-two wines are available by the glass (\$8-\$22) or half glass (\$4.50-\$11.50). If you can spare the shekels, let Bushong design a wine lineup to match your meal—his talent for it is extraordinary. We give him full run, try to guess what he'll come up with, watch him make choices that highlight subtle elements of dishes, and find our dining experience immeasurably enhanced. Alternatively, just let Bushong recommend something food-friendly enough to

accompany varied dishes while taking your preferences into account.

Millwright's menu features "inspired New England cuisine," not "New England-inspired cuisine." Note the difference, the implicit confidence, the higher level of promise. Anderson surely delivers on it. Dishware, glassware, even pieces of slate become blank canvases upon which Anderson paints masterworks of edible art. Nothing is impossible here. When I tease Anderson that I'm surprised his fresh menus aren't printed on paper actually milled there, I catch a twinkle in his eyes as he briefly considers the idea.

Square corn biscuits that flake off horizontally and have an inimitable texture reveal the talent of Anderson's pastry chef, Kristin Eddy, who creates the layering effect by cutting and folding sheets of dough with butter. The Johnny Cake meal is from Stonington's Stanton-Davis Farm, Connecticut's oldest farmstead, worked every year since 1654 and predating the Hop Brook Mill by 26 years.

The biscuits are served with a tall round of butter with honey, sea salt and black sesame seeds served on a piece of slate. A proper explanation of each such item would require a page. There are no shortcuts—only labor-intensive "longcuts" in Anderson's "from scratch" cooking. Good thing he's got a great chef de cuisine in Luke Venner and a strong supporting cast.

The biscuits are followed by a liquid amuse bouche, a purée of broccoli with housemade ricotta, orange oil and tiny purple edible violas. On our next visit, it's a shot of peach gazpacho with a Bourbon pecan froth. Genius is in such details.

The first food that we actually order is Millwright's deliriously

good squash blossom fritters (\$9), which are encrusted with the same cornmeal used to bake the biscuits, stuffed with zucchini, garnished with sliced radish and radish leaves, and finished with herb aioli. Plump briny Onset oysters (\$2.50) from Buzzard's Bay, Mass., are dressed with a little rhubarb mignonette and nasturtium, illuminating but not overpowering their superb natural flavor.

A green salad (\$10) with shallot, cucumber and radish in a garlic scape vinaigrette is so garden fresh it's startling. A corn chowder with lobster (\$11) is absolutely delightful, and only a food writer need contemplate the cleverness of a sauce vierge base perfumed with balms and anise. Soft smoked ricotta agnolotti (\$12) are surrounded by the prettiest, most vibrant tomato sauce I've ever encountered and topped with an olive crumble for flavor and texture. Zucchini makes a triple appearance in the veal sweetbreads (tiny scooped balls cooked in butter and mint, zucchini chips flavored with Aleppo pepper, and long cuts dressed in a nasturtium vinaigrette), but you may not notice as you savor these rich tasty morsels with almonds, mint and absinthe froth. There's such a level of sensuality to Anderson's creations.

Four servers practically click their heels together in unison as they place four starters before us with the precision of Swiss clockworks before explaining each dish. Cleverness abounds. Bruschetta is taken to new levels with a gorgeous tomato "sandwich" (\$11) of toasted baguette topped with whipped ricotta, yellow and red heirloom tomatoes from Rosedale Farms in Simsbury, black and white sesame seeds, incredible basil, a pickled strawberry vinaigrette and strawberry purée.

Littleneck clams (\$12) are served out of their shells with a small dice of potato, bacon and celery in a beurre fondue (not unlike a diluted hollandaise) that hits a lot of pleasure centers in the brain.

Allowed only one starter, it would have to be the rounds of torchon of foie gras (\$18) served, surprisingly, over rounds of housemade Boston brown bread on a round piece of slate with dots of stone fruit jam and a line of pecan purée. But I'm left gasping by a pretty round of fluke tartare (\$12) complemented with exotic tasting shreds of shiso grown locally to order, a buttermilk froth, puffed wild rice, and pickled blueberries that spring onto one's taste buds like a kid on a trampoline.

Between courses, we're treated to an "amuse tête" created by the multi-talented Bushong featuring sake, chartreuse, elderflower and Cynar artichoke liqueur mellowed with cucumber, an apparent riff on a Pimm's cup. After this combination palate cleanser/head tickler, I comment ruefully, "I'm really going to hate to leave here and return to the real world."

Millwright's may be uncommonly refined, but it's not uncommonly pricy: Only one entrée exceeds \$30. Square cuts of lamb loin (\$29), their edges beautifully crisped, are escorted by roasted eggplant yogurt, grilled fennel, espelette pepper crumbs, dots of herb aioli and confit orange heirloom tomatoes that somehow hold their shape until they explode in one's mouth. Roast salmon (\$26) may have been farmed in Maine—it's glorious nevertheless. Two thick pink skin-on pieces crusted in black trumpet mushroom and topped with a couple of stray pickled string beans are served over a faro with green bean segments and green bean pureed into green goddess sauce as well, another delightful multiple use

of the same ingredient in a dish. Again teasing, I indicate faint surprise that it's not Faroe Islands salmon with the faro, and again I can almost see Anderson's gears turning.

A lobster bake (\$29) is classic New England, but it's given a Spanish spin as a succulent tail is served over a saffron-laced bounty of chorizo, mussels out of their shells, potato, corn and fennel, the overflow contained in a second bowl. Spain is also summoned in a thick cut of moist, flaky striped bass (\$27), line caught the previous morning and served skin-on with black rice, a tomato nage and a side of panzanella salad that's really a cleverly deconstructed gazpacho. A duo of prime beef (\$33) showcases a gorgeous piece of New York strip cut like a filet mignon as well as teeth-tingling short rib marinated in red wine and aromatics and served in a shallot bordelaise sauce with real stem-on baby carrots and twice-baked potato cleverly shaped and browned to look like a long spiraled pastry.

Missteps are so minor and infrequent that they're almost imperceptible. A roast duck duo (\$28) features gorgeous fat-edged breast meat and duck leg croquettes with a squash soubise and summer vegetable succotash. The croquette could use a little puddle of aioli of one flavor or another for moisture, complication and contrast. A corn "pudding" (\$8) with black trumpet mushrooms and fines herbes makes a nice, New England-inspired side, but the dish needs something to cut its sweetness.

The desserts (\$9) are both classic and modern. A vibrant plum crumble is topped with vanilla bean ice cream. A slice of chocolaty blackout cake is served with roasted pecan ice cream and salted streusel. A honey

semifreddo in the shape of an Easter basket is gussied up with chocolate sorbet, Chantilly cream, toasted almonds and a salted chocolate handle. A palette for the palate, the peaches and cream dessert presents basil-infused peach compressed under vacuum, a blancmange dome, poppy seed meringue pipes, lemon basil sorbet, peach sorbet and dots of peach coulis garnished with edible violas. After our desserts, we're brought mignardises of Earl Grey-infused brownie.

At Millwright's, it seems Anderson can do no wrong. I'm left wondering, as great as he has been previously, has Anderson been held back until now? Or has he been holding something back? Asked these questions, Anderson laughs, saying one can achieve another level when everything in a restaurant is built around the food.

As we leave the restaurant, we're serenaded by a chorus of crickets and frogs that have made the mill site their home. Anything but run of the mill, Millwright's is staffed by a supremely dedicated team of professionals headed by a culinary wizard that draws most of its ingredients from nearby farms to a three-century-old building and makes magic. I gave Anderson my top rating previously at Copper Beech Inn—and now I have nothing higher to give out.

*Reviewer **Spencer Caldwell** has worked both sides of the aisle. He is a long-time restaurant critic and food writer. He has also worked as the director of quality control for a Manhattan-based fast food chain, as a wine steward for an upscale Westchester restaurant, and as a restaurant developer and consultant.*