



Foodie Field Trip Columbia Firehouse

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foodie, foody [‘fu-di] n.

An aficionado with a special interest in the preparation and consumption of gourmet food

The current occupant of the 1883 Columbia Steam Engine Fire Company is Neighborhood Restaurant Group’s Columbia Firehouse. An homage to the historic spot, the exposed brick, dark wood and brass laced with etched and stained glass, and candelabras is equal parts masculine and feminine. It is here that Chef James Wolfe is adding his influence to the Old Town Alexandria dining scene.

We’re greeted by Bar Manager, Steve Warner - formerly of Eventide - who has brought to Columbia Firehouse his characteristic enthusiasm for creative cocktails as well as a fun, new concept - monthly spirits classes that dispel mysteries of the bar (think single malt vs. blended, shaken vs. stirred). On our visit, we chose from the ‘historic cocktails’ listed complete with dates and history of origin. The gin, lemon juice, and champagne in the 1929 Stork Club’s ‘French 75’ is reminiscent of a classic sour cocktail, but effervescent, and served in a statuesque champagne flute. Blood and Sand from the 1922 movie of the same name blends strong scotch, tart orange and sweet cherry brandy in a martini glass, with a house made cherry at the bottom.

Chef Wolfe believes in utilizing locally farmed produce for his menu. Since the fresh produce of warmer months from the farms of Southern Maryland, the Northern Neck and the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia still lie ahead, Foodie Field Trip sampled the fall/winter menu, of which many dishes will continue into the summer.

Columbia Firehouse’s appetizer

menu offers foodie worthy pub food like a ‘build your own’ charcuterie plate, in which the customer selects from a mosaic of house-made and locally-made forcemeats, cheese, and condiments. We chose pork rillettes that melt on the tongue with a touch of spicy heat to cut through the rich fattiness; rustic, chunky country pate speckled with pistachios and cornichons; delicately seasoned, creamy textured chicken and cranberry sausage; and nutty Lamb Chopper’s sheep cheese all garnished with house-made sweet, tangy cherry mostarda, spicy pickled banana peppers, whole grain mustard, and cornichons.

By contrast, the roasted squash soup was a velvety treat for the mouth. Pureed perfectly, topped with dried cranberries and candied pecans, and finished with tantalizing cinnamon crème fraiche, this soup has a perfect balance of texture and flavor that makes it an interesting dish worthy of a repeat performance.

Don’t expect to be overpowered by the ginger and lemongrass vinaigrette in the Tuna Tartare Taco app, Chef Wolfe wants the delicate flavor of the tuna to come through, and it does, in nice contrast to the crunchy deep-fried shell.

Columbia Firehouse offers a daily plate on their dinner entrée menu as well as other feels-like-home-but-better favorites. The Monday night pork shank practically drips off the bone, plated on a show stopping polenta - the creaminess of the grain and slight citrus of the gremolata undulates across the tongue.

The Maryland Rockfish is a beautiful homage to cool-weather flavors. Brussels

sprouts with house bacon smokiness and winter squash roasted in a rich, sweet and savory maple glaze, are topped with the mildly-flavored seared local rockfish.

Food Network’s Meat & Potatoes recently featured the Bison Short Rib Stroganoff with house made Pappardelle, guaranteeing its permanent place on the menu, and we understand why. The meat is so tender it melts off the bone. The Pappardelle carry the flavors of the meat and a delicious mushroom gravy is full of flavor without being overpowered by wine, a common problem with stroganoff dishes.

The classic and comfort meets foodie twist on the menu finishes well with dessert. A whimsical platter of house made versions of childhood favorites like the Hostess cupcake and Snicker Bar is fun. The coconut cream cheese crème brulee is an interesting twist on the classic in and of itself, but the sorbet garnish had us guessing at the myriad flavors until our waiter William revealed the mystery concoction of passion fruit, citrus, white pepper, cardamom and other exotic spices.

Chef Wolfe delivers on his goal at Columbia Firehouse - to create an American neighborhood bistro and bar that is warm and inviting, and offers familiar, comfort food done right.

Columbia Firehouse: 109 S. Saint Asaph St., Alexandria, VA. 703-683-1776. www.columbiafirehouse.com

Q&A

Name 5 staple ingredients you must have in your personal kitchen at all times.

Olive oil, garlic, curry, potatoes and chicken stock.

What’s your favorite dish to make right now? At home and in the restaurant.

At home I would have to say anything lamb. At work, the pork shanks.

What advice would you give to the home cook? What do you consider a common mistake made by them?

Have fun! Don’t try too hard, relax, and enjoy your time in the kitchen. Every moment is a learning experience.

If you had 30 minutes to cook a nice meal, what would it be?

Oysters on the half shell, preferably Treasure Cove and Wianno, with mignonette and lamb chops with a shaved fennel and mache green salad, smoked blue cheese and blood orange vinaigrette.

Are you today where you envisioned yourself being five years ago?

Almost. To me cooking is a progression of learned experiences and one will never know everything.

What celebrity would you love to cook for?

Bob Dylan

What’s the craziest request you’ve ever gotten?

Well done tartare. Seriously.