



Kudos are in Order -- A Review

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[Daryl Wine Bar and Restaurant](#)

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When Daryl first opened its doors, members of the Garden State's professional "hired belly brigade" -- as they are often prone to do -- descended like a pack of ravening hyenas; in some cases, or so it seemed, before the ink had had sufficient time to dry on the menus.

The problem with this form of Speedy Gonzales gastronomy, of course, is that it inevitably gives the reviewer -- and, hence, the reader -- a somewhat less than congruent picture of the establishment in question. Even the best of restaurants go through a significant amount of fine-tuning during the first months of operation. The kitchen and wait staffs settle into their particular grooves, and the bill of fare undergoes a little -- sometimes a lot -- of tweaking. In point of fact, myriad additions and deletions to the menu are not that uncommon.

Restaurant reviews -- and restaurants themselves, for that matter -- are ephemeral enough without some overzealous Johnny/Janie-on-the-spot pushing the envelope. The critic who rushes to judgment in the hopes of beating his/her colleagues to the punch is likely to come away with a host of information that may very well be out of date before the magnum opus even hits the printed page.

But now that the mad dash is over and all concerned have had time to catch their breath, so to speak, perhaps it's time to take another look at what I would certainly consider one of the Garden State's premiere dining establishments...

Daryl Wine Bar and Restaurant is a collaborative effort between executive chef-owner David Drake and partners Robert Paulus, Daryl Sorrentini (the woman after whom the restaurant is named), and Lee Chasalow. However, should you be expecting an instant replay of Restaurant David Drake in Rahway, you're in for quite a surprise -- decoratively at least.

Whereas David Drake is rustically warm & cozy, Daryl is cool & chic. The informally elegant ambiance comes replete with persimmon walls, dark wooden floors, sleek subdued lighting, stylish table settings, and super comfy white high-backed chairs. The scene is infinitely more Manhattan than Middlesex County.

The center of attraction, however, is the striking crystal quartz bar backed by a state-of-the-art preservation system containing over sixty wines by the glass; each capable of being dispensed in 2-, 4- or 6-ounce pours, according to the customer's preference. In the adjacent wine shop, not only are favorite wines available for purchase, but oenophiles will also discover a unique card-operated Enomatic Wine Preservation System that permits patrons to pour their own vintages by the glass.



Daryl exudes a definitive sense of style. But style will only take a restaurant so far; there needs to be substance as well... and this is readily discernable in the impeccable quality & innovative integration of ingredients and in the attractive -- but decidedly unfussy -- presentations. Mr. Drake now divides his time between his two enterprises; but his chef de cuisine, Juan Carlos Fernandez -- a graduate of the French Culinary Institute and alumnus of both Restaurant David Drake and Nicholas -- does a superb job in turning out an extraordinary array of eclectic/fusion fare.

Tapas is the name of the game here, which certainly isn't a startlingly new form of culinary endeavor to Garden State restaurants. But here the concept has been both revved up and refined. White rectangular plates are set before each diner as part of the place setting, with the tapas offerings then placed at the center of the table. The object, of course, is to encourage sharing, a key concept at Daryl.

Arthur R. Namendorf Parmesan Gnocchi (left) and Salad of Duck Confit (right)

And the joys of this form of communal participation are immensely rewarding: the crackling morsels of duck confit combined with diminutive slices of beets and slightly bitter greens infused with a superlative horseradish dressing (\$8.00); ethereally textured

Parmesan gnocchi in the company of chanterelles, corn kernels, bits of summer squash, and haricots verts (\$10.00); the ingenious pairing of white polenta with pignoli puree (\$9.00); the sensuous subtleties of Thai curry vegetable soup invigorated with coconut milk and Thai basil (\$7.00); the delicate, airy dimensions of brandade (salt cod) croquettes kissed by a provocative piquillo pepper sauce (\$6.00). And those who appreciate a creative twist on comfort cuisine will be unable to resist the considerable gastronomic enticement of two mini burgers redolent of cheddar, crowned with lusty slices of applewood bacon, and garnished with zippy homemade ketchup (\$6.00).

One may, of course, dine exclusively on the tapas plates and have a supremely enjoyable evening... mixing... matching... sharing. After all, this is what Daryl is all about. On the other hand, one may also avail oneself of the "Chef's Signature Dishes" (main courses) and choose the more traditional appetizer/entree route. And these larger plates should certainly not be dismissed out of hand, as they are just as carefully prepared and as beautifully presented as their diminutive siblings.

The slow cooked loin of domestic lamb (\$27.00), for example, is absolutely exquisite. Exhibiting just the proper shade of pink, the lusciously thick slices are moist and inordinately tender & flavorful. They are aided and abetted by perfectly roasted fingerling potatoes, while a pungent goat cheese puree serves up an artistic splash of creamy companionship.

Although a bit on the dry side, the New Zealand red snapper (\$27.00) receives a significant boost from a scintillating seabed of green & black olives, capers, chorizo sausage, and tomato emulsion. I would also highly recommend the superb sauteed skate wing teamed with zucchini carpaccio, dusting of Parmesan, and outstanding basil-lemon dressing (\$24.00) or the extraordinary "David's Bouillabaisse," a classic lobster/seafood stew buttressed by toasted sliced bread and rouille (\$44.00 for 2 persons/\$85.00 for 4-6).

Desserts -- courtesy of Derek Chervenak, who is also the pastry chef at Restaurant David Drake in Rahway -- provide their own unique rewards. The "Donut Holes" (\$8.00) are really marvelously light and airy donut "pillows," with ramekins of addictive Jack Daniels hot fudge and star anise dipping sauces furnishing plenty of pizzazz.

But for those who find the peanut butter/chocolate combo completely irresistible, there is really only one choice: the "PB & J." Creamy smooth nuggets of peanut butter mousse are lovingly caressed by a rich chocolate glaze and chaperoned by a tantalizing raspberry-thyme gelee. The phrase "sinfully seductive" comes immediately to mind.

Like everything else, the service -- whether at the bar or at the table -- is in top form. The only ghost in the otherwise well-oiled machine: a bus boy from the "You guys done?" school of dubious restaurant comportment. This is, unfortunately, a colloquialism that has become all too common these days, but which seemed terribly out of place in such a fine establishment.

Be that as it may, there is absolutely no question that Daryl Wine Bar and Restaurant adds a touch of class to the New Brunswick and the New Jersey dining scenes. Kudos are definitely in order.