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**SAVOR 6** HM 05.10

## **Matthew's Restaurant**

55 Mill Street Unionville (860) 673-7373 matthews-restaurant.com



by Spencer Caldwell Photos by Lisa Brisson

■ Gulf Coast sailors know that, if one can weather an initial squall line, one may find a change of winds behind it.

Our visit to Matthew's Restaurant in the Unionville section of Farmington began inauspiciously. We spotted the big, bright Matthew's sign positioned in front of the multiuse building, but not the little markers directing us to the rear. Thus, we parked and walked to the front entrance.

Just inside, we smelled wet paint, and a propped-up sign seemed to direct us to a paperedover office door. Only when we looked far down the corridor did we spot a wall-mounted sign that led us to the restaurant entrance at the rear of the building. And when we reached the apologetic hostess, our reservation for a discreet side table had been lost. But as one of my favorite sailors used to say when obstacles presented themselves, "Always go to the end of the road."

We were glad we did. Our first visit to Matthew's – and a second in which the hostess welcomed us like returning heroes and explained the mix-up – resulted in memorable dining experiences. In the dining room, taupe walls were hung with tasteful artwork depicting forests, lakes and rivers. Tables were well-spaced, a necessity when some dishes are



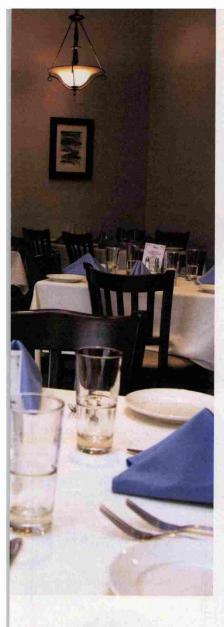
prepared tableside. Floors were hardwood, but high acoustictiled ceilings absorbed sound. Some customers dined instead at the convivial square bar, their plates nestled on powder blue, triangle-folded linen napkins that contrasted well with orange walls. Patio dining commences in the spring, followed in summer by a deck on the bank of the Farmington River with its own bar, grill and menu.

The dining room experiences a surge of energy when owner Matthew Popkin steps on the floor, sometimes just stopping by tables to gauge guests' happiness, other times entertaining them with his tableside theatrics. Popkin is a Slidell, Louisiana, native who has held numerous restaurant and hospitality positions, including seven years spent at the Saint Louis Hotel in New Orleans'



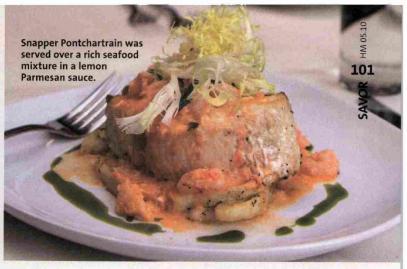
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French Quarter. His exuberance finds its way into the food.

In executive chef Joseph Hill, whose résumé includes stints at West Hartford's Pond House Café and the Old Lyme Inn, Popkin seems to have found a good match for his eclectic tastes. The restaurant's menu contains elements I would classify as contemporary American, continental and New Orleans. Presentations tend toward the



dramatic, even architectural.

The modest wine list (\$24-\$70) encompasses vintages from Italy, France, Argentina, California and Washington, 18 of which are available by the glass (\$6.50-\$13.50). We tried two of the least expensive offerings – a 2007 Flying Fish Merlot, Washington (\$6.50/\$24) and a 2007 Napa Ridge Cabernet, California (\$6.50/\$24) – and found both surprisingly pleasant.

Warm flour-dusted rolls were served with whipped honey butter one night, regular whipped butter the next. The rolls were a nice accompaniment to Matthew's unforgettable soups. As light and lovely in taste as appearance, a pale yellow sweet corn and spicy crab bisque (\$5.95) contained plentiful pieces of picked meat. And a roasted garlic bisque (\$5.95) was so creamy, rich and flavorful that we practically swooned.

Salads also excelled. I might have called a Brazilian hearts of palm salad (\$9.95) with baby lettuce and radish in a citrus vinaigrette a tad unfocused, the greens overwhelming the buds, except it was so stunningly fresh it won me over. And the tableside Caesar (\$7 apiece) is a performance one can truly savor. The crunch of really fresh hearts of romaine and garlic croutons and the bite of anchovy fillets, dried mustard, lemon juice and

Parmigiano-Reggiano reminded me that renowned chef Caesar Cardini has experienced an historic betrayal of his own at the hands of many of today's chefs.

I noted nifty tricks that revealed this chef's expertise. Tiny patches of mashed potato kept scallops and polenta cakes from sliding off their plates as they were brought from the kitchen. With baked oysters, it was a blue linen napkin cleverly folded like a four-leaf clover.

Some appetizers were merely damned good. A "deconstructed" coquilles Saint Jacques (\$12.95) featured plump deep-sea scallops, mushroom duxelles, Gruyère fondue and a crumb crust, but cold braised leeks and an insipid tomato chutney proved to be subtraction by addition. Superb sautéed forest mushrooms (\$9.95) in puff pastry gained depth of flavor from a rich game stock laced with Madeira wine, but we couldn't detect any of the advertised truffle.

Some appetizers simply couldn't have been improved upon. Baked Noank-farmed Blue Points (\$10.95) stuffed with spinach, Andouille sausage and Parmesan gratinée were the tastiest cooked oysters I ever had. Calvados-braised pork belly (\$10.95) served over a toasted polenta cake was intensely rich and flavorful. And so often forgettable, an ahi tuna tartare

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(\$12.95) combined nicely seasoned sushi-grade tuna, a light crunchy seaweed salad and wasabi foam.

But I had other fish to fry. Probably the restaurant's signature dish and one that Popkin has prepared on local TV, snapper Pontchartrain (\$26) featured faultless fish, its edges lightly crisped, served over a rich yet subtle mixture of shrimp, jumbo lump crab, mushroom and tomato in a lemon Parmesan cream sauce. Butter-poached New England lobster tail and claws (\$32) were displayed atop a sinfully rich shrimp and scallop risotto. What would New Orleans be without sin?

Meats fared almost as well as seafood. Braised Berkshire lamb shank (\$21) in an almost-toowiney reduction was served with a charming crépinette composed of polenta, zucchini and goat cheese. And Matthew's made beef Wellington (\$28) – the downfall of so many Hell's Kitchen competitors – look effortless, the tender reddish filet encased in puff pastry glowing like two infernal eyes.

The desserts were a welcome change from those found at many other restaurants. Its bread pudding (\$6.50) showcased Granny Smiths from Bishop's Orchards glazed in caramel and apple brandy, baked in brioche and custard, and then served in a Bourbon sauce. Its blueberry cobbler (\$7) transcended all expectations because matchless Maine blueberries were utilized.

Yet two desserts not only thrilled but filled the dining room with intoxicating scents. The Callebaut chocolate fondue for two (\$14.95) with strawberry, banana and marsh-

mallows was strictly self-service. The intense bananas Foster (\$7 apiece), flambéed tableside with dark rum, was a grand production, a finger bringing blue flame from table candle to Sterno pot like Prometheus bearing fire.

Matthew's offers an engaging mix of the classic and the modern, with ringmaster Popkin providing good old-fashioned showmanship. **HM** 



Spencer Caldwell has worked both sides of the aisle. He is a long-term 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.