

DINING

Review

FALLING IN LOVE AGAIN

Alewife's seafood-centered
menu will hook you
By Genevelyn Steele

Roasted skate
chop with sweet
potato curry and
rice grits

TYLER DARDEN

Review

Meg Ryan faking an orgasm for Billy Crystal in “When Harry Met Sally” might be the most famous deli sequence on film. But that kind of hair-thrashing pleasure isn’t what I’m thinking of when I tell you that you must eat at **Alewife** — though there’s plenty of that, too. It’s the onscreen duo’s delayed romantic relationship, a comfortable but expressive one, tempered by trial and error, that reminds me of Lee Gregory’s Church Hill seafood palace. For Gregory, a three-time James Beard Foundation semifinalist, passion runs deep in his aqueous couplings.

A seasoned restaurant, akin to a successful second marriage or a longtime friendship turned amorous, is what I desire when dropping coin on an indulgent meal. I seek creativity that nudges familiarity, rather than dominating it, serving up quality ingredients prepared by practiced hands. I yearn to mentally surf supper long after its consumption, riding the best bites again and again, knowing that when I go back, they’ll be better still in reality. To these wants, Alewife has committed.

The crew will be familiar if you’ve eaten at The Roosevelt, Gregory’s Southern-tinged restaurant founded with Kendra Feather. Katy Best, formerly of The Roosevelt, created Alewife’s beverage program. It, like Gregory’s current bill of fare, is based on sustainability. In the wine world, this means choosing responsibly farmed, lesser-known grapes such as the crisp Italian pecorino (nothing like the cheese!) over major varietals and industrial tipple. Fruit scraps are dehydrated and powdered, then used to flavor cocktails. Straws are metal.

Alewife’s open kitchen employs fish without catch limits, such as skate, smelt and sardines, as well as the fish heads and tails that are often tossed out. A fine way to sample several of those things is by ordering the

Siren Song, an ever-changing pupu platter of five to seven appetizers. Rockfish collar, the spiky, triangular nugget sandwiched between the fish’s gills and its body, is roasted on a charcoal yakitori grill, then flashed under a broiler until its skin is crisped, the

luxurious, fatty meat loosened into a sluice of sweet and sour that dribbled down my fingers and into my mouth like the bone marrow of the sea. Don’t dare try to eat it with a knife and fork: You need to manhandle collars and tails like wings, or you’ll miss all the best bits. I also dove into a shoal of roasted baby carrots that possessed the depth and flavor of a long braise, yet were still crunchy, topped with bonito flakes that waved like a stand of coral. These were the appetizers on the lazy Susan that captured my fancy — though I certainly wouldn’t kick the lightly breaded smelts, swordfish tartare or crab claws scented with the salty, celery bite of Old Bay off my plate.

Under starters, orecchiette with rock shrimp and Alfredo sauce, a creation of Chef de Cuisine Bobo Catoe Jr., took the heavy dressing and brightened it with miso made from stracchino, an Italian cow’s milk cheese. This funky, tangy version of the usual cream sauce, sweetened by the sea, produced a dish that could have been a metaphor for the New York Dolls

tunes played that night — edgy but familiar, comfortable but creative, known without seeming dated — or a metaphor for the bones of the pale-hued dining room itself, which is feminine without flounce, its porthole mirrors reflecting a serious cooking ethos.

There was only one flaw in the nearly perfect service, and it came at the end of the meal. After devouring plates of seafood, including feathery, flavorful skate left on the bone, I’d left a mess that was unappetizing to look at under the pineapple pavlova,

which itself could use a step up in presentation. (The pavlova was stunningly delicious, but the large chunks of shattered meringue placed over fruit curd resembled a broken Styrofoam container spilling its contents.) A quick wipe-down before dessert would’ve refreshed the table, though this criticism feels almost unkind, like pointing out parsley in your partner’s teeth after they’ve performed with finesse.

But the real reason to go deep into Church Hill, other than the neighborhood’s magnificent architecture, is Alewife’s wagyu flank steak, an iteration of which is almost always on menu. Mine was barely seared, just enough to perfume the room with the scent of caramelized fat and the hiss of smoke, its inside scarlet and tender, accompanied by potato gratin and topped with onion rings. As I brought my fork to my mouth, I heard the woman at the next table look to her husband and say, “I’ll have what she’s having.” 🍴



Alewife

3120 E. Marshall St.
804-325-3426

Hours: Tuesday to Thursday, 5 to 11 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 5 p.m. to midnight; kitchen closes at 10 p.m.

Prices: \$8 to \$28



Alewife Chef/Owner Lee Gregory (left) and Chef de Cuisine Bobo Catoe Jr.



TYLER DARDEN





(Top) Grilled wagyu flank steak with potatoes, kale, pearl onions and steak sauce; *(Left)* the dining room at Alewife; *(Right)* house martini



EAT & DRINK

REVIEW

DUCKS IN A ROW

A new chef complements a
caring staff at The Shaved Duck
by GENEVELYN STEELE



Steak tartare with
homemade bread

Edited by EILEEN MELLON

Though Richmond has plenty of super eats, finding a triple treat of great food, well-made drinks and knowledgeable, unhurried service is the white whale of dining. Lucky Midlothian, The Shaved Duck spears this triumvirate. Paraphrasing Melville: As for me, this city dweller is now tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote.

Located in Westchester Commons, The Shaved Duck opened in October 2017 under Chef Matt Kirwan, who departed for The Roosevelt in December. Rotating in is Chef Patrick Wrenn, formerly of Amour Wine Bistro, Can Can Brasserie and Capital Ale House. Wrenn opened the Ale House's Midlothian kitchen, so he's familiar with the area. Since January, he's been shaking up The Shaved Duck's concise menu.

Owner Joe Kmetz (whose father and brother are also owners) makes the restaurant neighborly. I give him props for bartending on an early Sunday visit, paying such attention to detail that he asked whether I wanted ice in my grapefruit juice, though he had his hands full at the busy bar. It's very easy for a bartender to forget about diners in favor of wooing drinkers, but Kmetz didn't.

My duck hash married duck confit with crisped chunks of hand-cut potato, peppers and lacy fried, sunny-side-up eggs. Eggs served in a warmed bowl equals my kind of wake-up call, a finer service point that I rarely see at breakfast. The texture of the confit was a little hammy, rather than salty-silky, a flaw corrected in future visits, but the potatoes made for a forgiving foil, as did the creamy, decadent cheese grits with house-smoked New York cheddar. Definitely ask for the thickly fruity, spicy peach hot sauce.

The Shaved Duck navigates a course of brasserie classics, such as an elevated burger, then veers toward gastropub, with homemade ravioli in brie fondue with duck confit. There's always a market fish. The rockfish I had one night was exemplary, galvanized skin molded over filleted flesh with interesting sides. One of the benefits of a strong chef running a smaller menu is that everything is extremely fresh and delicious, as it is here.

One night, I arrived at 8:10 p.m. and braced myself as I asked to be seated in a room that looked ready to close. The welcome was warm and immediate. I chose to sit at the bar, where I ordered a glass of rosé. But when the drink was

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But even more appealing than the duck leg is the ease with which the restaurant carries itself.

delivered, I realized I'd made a mistake, ordering a still wine instead of a sparkling. Bartender Geneva Gordon graciously offered me a sip of the other wine and let me choose my preference. Meanwhile, her brother, lead bartender Craig Gordon, was busy brainstorming drinks. One cocktail, the Midlothian, takes a traditional, bourbon-based Manhattan to mind-searing mode with the addition of yellow Chartreuse, B&B, and cranberry bitters. To date, it's the best drink I've had this year.

A pot of dense pimento cheese — the owners' family recipe — thermalized its garnishes of pickled red onions and jalapeños. Better still was the restaurant's steak tartare, striking the right balance of buttery, sirloin and filet mignon, sour capers, and a whole quail egg centered on the mound of raw beef. Picking up the egg shell

and releasing its golden yolk offers tactile pleasure while showcasing the superior product used for this dish.

The confit duck leg was magic. Enrobed by a lush tomato butter sauce with a burnt ember color, it hits the crisped-to-shattering skin of the bird with a thunderclap of sweet and sharp. But even more appealing than the duck leg is the ease with which the restaurant carries itself. The room is light and airy, and it's possible from almost any angle to observe the clean, open kitchen humming with efficiency. Then there's dessert.

Pastry Chef Chelsea Mitt's creations are both homey and haute. Take the immense Love of Bananas, a bowl of brown-butter ice cream, bananas Foster and banana cheesecake-filled wontons. It's a fun mess of temperature and texture that makes you want to down the dippings like cereal milk. Then there's the refined presentation of s'mores, a log of flourless chocolate cake with toasted meringue, graham cracker crumbs and a marshmallow spear. This dessert I took home, at Mitt's suggestion that it would travel well. As I paid my check, I heard one of the employees say to her co-workers, “Goodnight, family.” After the attention I had just received, I felt like she was talking to me. 🍷

REVIEW



THE SHAVED DUCK

15408 Westchester
Commons Way, Midlothian
804-379-7505
\$7 to \$28





(Top) Crispy leg of duck with brioche, Swiss chard, sweet cauliflower and tomato butter; *(left)* pimento cheese with house pickles and bread; *(right)* the dining room at The Shaved Duck

EAT & DRINK



Executive Chef Brandon Bundy
(left) with Saltbox Oyster Co.
Chef-owner Matthew J. Tlusty

REVIEW

NEW OYSTER CULT

Saltbox ferries a San Francisco-style oyster bar to Willow Lawn
by GENEVELYN STEELE



Matthew J. Tlusty has had an epically varied culinary career, working in hotel restaurants, a family-owned steakhouse and multiple seafood spots. Limani Fish Grill — Tlusty's most renowned restaurant — fell to his passing pasta joint, Duro. Seminal for Richmond, Limani netted fish from exotic waters, serving it head-on in the early aughts, when barramundi was often returned by diners for decapitation. Here's the one that matters now: Saltbox Oyster Co., a hulking space in Willow Lawn, is a pearl cultivated by the chef's lifelong love of the sea.

A visit to the West Coast during a recent stint with HRI Properties made Tlusty adore cookery anew. "You cannot describe diversity in food until you've eaten in San Francisco," he says. "I had interest from investors [in opening another Richmond restaurant], but I didn't want to redo Limani. I wanted an oyster bar, where nothing was fancy but everything was good." He's succeeded at Saltbox.

What separates Saltbox from other local shellfish spots, such as Rappahannock, which spotlights East Coast bivalves, or West Coast Provisions, which has an extensive raw bar plus sushi, is Tlusty's singular devotion to oysters, widely sourced and variously served: On the half shell, fried, broiled or set in knock-'em-back shooters, he loves and affordably offers them all.

The restaurant's proletarian location in the middle of a shopping center, its large patio facing the playground, is a game changer. As malls struggle to reel in shoppers, they've turned to recreation and indie dining to draw clams to their anchor stores. Saltbox is reason enough to go to Willow Lawn.

One Saturday night, I neglect to make a reservation and am ushered to a community table reminiscent of the wooden six-tops visible on the landing page for San Francisco's Hog Island Oyster Co. Usually I'm not a fan of communal dining. Large tables are difficult to maneuver around, with deafening

volume and a potluck of companions. Here it was a welcome change. The room's acoustics and smaller table size help, but it's the diversity of the restaurant's clientele that make our meal. If you don't want to dine communally, make a reservation. This is a deservedly busy restaurant.

I order single oysters broiled several ways at \$3 each, surely a pain for the kitchen to shuck to order, but they do.

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Matthew J. Tlusty, chef-owner
of Saltbox Oyster Co.

The oysters include a delicate Parmesan and rosemary; a hearty **cherrywood bacon with arugula**; and a creamy spinach, fennel and Pernod. Unfortunately, two of the three arrive cold on this visit, but that's not the case on my next two trips.

From the raw bar, I slurp a Kusshi, Japanese for precious, from Deep Bay, British Columbia. Its purple-streaked cups and long body resemble a cornucopia. I also try a Katama Bay, cultivated on Martha's Vineyard, a creamy, melon-sweet bite. Katamas are mostly consumed by tourists and rarely leave the island. Virginia, Maine and California oysters are additionally listed.

West African gumbo also arrives cold, and without a spoon, but it's so luscious that those slips don't stick in my craw. The backbone of the thickly spiced soup is fresh-daily fish stock, along with the holy trinity of pepper, onion and celery, scented with lemony sumac. The recipe is from Executive Chef Brandon Bundy, who does the heavy lifting in the kitchen. Many of the preparations, from the Angus rib-eye with Appaloosa baked beans to the éclair cake, a honey of a dessert that's essentially a cross between a Boston cream pie and tiramisu, are his.

From Tlusty's culinary treasure chest arises whole branzino, stuffed with garlic and thyme and seared until it's crispy outside. An enormous lump crab cake, its flesh made sweeter with tidbits of rosy claw meat pressed throughout the patty, tops a decadent remoulade with pickled eggs, a sauce so rich I sneak it into my mouth, as if relishing it bit by bit magically reduces its caloric wallop.

Tlusty's signature carrot-dill soup has made its way home again. I never tire of its ginger undertones and creme fraiche.

Because Tlusty has been cooking for decades, he's cultivated relationships with purveyors who enable him to find uber-fresh fish and to stay one step ahead when it comes to sourcing. Saltbox's wine list, which veers more to white than red, with interesting choices by the glass such as the green almond-nuanced vermentino, thoughtfully complements oysters, as do his beer and cocktail offerings.

In February, when I visited, the restaurant was still getting its service legs, but I have no doubt it's steadier now. I've dined well over the years with this chef. Saltbox, though not his most formal or fancy place, is his most accessible. It's also my favorite. **B**



JUSTIN CHESNEY





(Top) The dining room at Saltbox Oyster Co.; *(left)* whole branzino stuffed with garlic, lemon and thyme; *(right)* the rotating menu of oysters