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FOOD & DRINK

Norfolk's Glass Light restaurant offers extravagance, whimsy, and sometimes perfection

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By MATTHEW KORFHAGE
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT | FEB 28, 2020



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At the [Glass Light Hotel](#), every egg is perfect.

In this new downtown Norfolk restaurant from Michelin-starred French chef Serge Gouloumès, that is certainly true of the elaborate and magical confections of meringue found on the dinner and dessert menus. But it is also true when the egg is sunny-side up.

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The farm egg served atop the gooily cheesy croque monsieur is not perfect because it tastes good, although of course it does. It is perfect in the way a geometrician would imagine an egg's perfection.

Its base is a circle of white that looks as if drawn with a compass, its airy quarter-inch thickness unburdened by even the rumor of char. Quivering atop the whiteness is a dome of orange-yellow yolk.

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Whatever its indulgence, I love this egg for existing. It serves as a rebuke to nature's sloppiness.

Gouloumès — who received his Michelin star on the Southern coast of France, where the honor is an Olympian feat — is heir to a French food tradition that is laborious, exacting, obsessive, extravagant, time-consuming and, above all, expensive.

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Executive Chef Serge Gouloumes works in the kitchen of the Glass Light Hotel and Restaurant on Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2020, in Norfolk. (Kaitlin McKeown / The Virginian-Pilot)

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It has been years, perhaps decades, since formal French food has served as the main lodestar for American indulgence: But here it is in force.

The open kitchen over which Gouloumès presides with martial calm is a teeming hive of aprons, filled with cooks who'd likely be head chefs at other restaurants in Hampton Roads. The sous chef, Zack Close, was the sous at the esteemed Cafe Boulud in New York. Two chefs who ran the kitchen at nearby Four Eleven York are line cooks at Glass Light.

The restaurant's interior is another unlikely luxury, somewhere between an opulently appointed lobby and a venue for an alien wedding. Tables are nested between rows of lamps whose form seems lifted from C.S. Lewis' "Perelandra," their fixtures the shape of giant pill capsules that have swallowed other pills.

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A bunny sculpture adorns the bar at the Glass Light Hotel and Restaurant in Norfolk. (Kaitlin McKeown / The Virginian-Pilot)

The boutique hotel is named after the art gallery it houses, and glass art is dispersed around the restaurant — notably Dale Chihuly foldings of glass that are mirrored by some of the restaurant's ornate dishes, and a human-sized pink bunny lounging with sordid loucheness behind the bar.

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offer little overlap among dishes.

Over a month, I have visited at odd times: Monday mornings, Thursday afternoons. Only once, on a late Sunday, was Gouloumès not visible in the kitchen.

Time after time the execution on the food has been admirable, nearly whimsical in its flawlessness.

And it is very French: The pancake at breakfast is a fluffy creme-topped souffle that requires no syrup to be enjoyed. The souffle available after dinner is a crisp-edged custard with texture that approaches transcendence.

A medium-rare hanger steak — served with eggs, hash-brown square and salad at breakfast for \$19 — arrives neatly caramelized on its exterior and buoyantly pink within, served over mushroom reduction and with a peppercorn sauce that takes four hours to prepare. It is a school in delicate umami, a heartening detente between acid and fat.

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But for fun, be a Philistine. Order your eggs scrambled. They will arrive as airily caked and buttery as a French omelette, so uniformly yellow they seem lit from within.

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At lunch, for equal fun, order the burger, which is ambitiously priced at \$18. It is made with pasture-raised beef from Montana and served on lightly-toasted brioche. Its top is drenched with caramelized onions and two fat slices of gooey Camembert. For reasons I don't know, our server warned us somewhat ominously that the burger contains mayonnaise.

But of course it does: This burger is French. It is fat and butter and cooked-to-temp beefy tenderness, and it is indulgence. It arrives with some of the most exquisite diner-style french fries I've yet eaten, served in a wee fryer basket that is not the basket they were fried in. They are made with canonical Idaho Russets and canola oil, with a precisely crisped exterior and airy fluff within, uniform and balanced in their salt. Alongside it: The world's tiniest Heinz bottle, opened just for you.

It is a loving quotation of American diner fries, a bit like those too-perfect "punk rock" leather jackets made by high-end designers, with straps and aggressive metal studs. When the fries were gone, I missed them.

Gouloumés' cooking is best experienced, however, on the dinner menu, a meal you can budget at \$50-\$75 per person before drinks.

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But this is where you will find the cooking that made Gouloumés' international career, whether a foie-gras-laden apple tart swimming in bourbon sauce, or ornate desserts with a fetish for the baroque.

Icelandic cod has been served in multiple preparations, including a plate that looks like tic-tac-toe played with carrots.

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The Icelandic cod is photographed at the Glass Light Hotel and Restaurant on Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2020, in Norfolk. (Kaitlin McKeown/The Virginian-Pilot)

The most recent version is simpler, served with kohlrabi and onions. The focus is on the filet, steamed and buttered fish so moist and tender it exists less as flakes than as the sublimated essence of fish, topped with dust of seed and spice. The secret to its depth is the fish stock that serves as its sauce, accented with dill and parsley oil.

Elsewhere among the entrees are scallops, served in a crescent of vegetables at the borders of the plate, encircling a sea of bright green: shallot-watercress sauce made aromatic with vermouth and lathered into foam.

From tart to pistachio crusts, the desserts are rich, textured and intricate. Even at lunch your dessert options might include an ile flottante — a classically French “floating island” of soft meringue atop a sea of English cream.

Here, a mere single meringue will not do: The sea of cream floats not just fluffy French meringue but Italian-style meringue kisses and some nibbles of the Swiss style. A lovely pistachio macaron substitutes for the traditional pistachio dust, with candied nuts as buried treasure. The dessert is like an activity set for gluttonous adults.

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Pineapple carpaccio with cocoa foam and passion sorbet is photographed at the Glass Light Hotel and Restaurant on Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2020, in Norfolk. (Kaitlin McKeown / The Virginian-Pilot)

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Cocktails have been well made, with a particular standout being a brown-butter-washed spin on the old fashioned that mirrors the savor and sweetness of the food menu.

The wine list, however, rewards caution. In few worlds should the glass list's sole Oregon pinot be Rascal — and in fewer still should that glass cost \$11 when a full bottle costs \$12 at retail. Value and selection are both better with French wines.

Where the Glass Light fails, it tends to do so at its margins. A ceviche appetizer at lunch, not a common specialty at a French restaurant, might be a bit tepid in its flavors and especially its acidity.

An impressively rich mocha dessert may fail in its architecture, with a hard roll of mousse-stuffed chocolate atop much softer chocolate —meaning that to cut it, you must force the log through the softer chocolate beneath it, turning the plate into a chocolate hot dog.

Service at dinner is knowledgeable, attentive, and occasionally even sly: Did you use the wrong fork, then send it away with your appetizer? It will reappear under your elbow without you noticing.

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But mishaps can happen during the day. Your breakfast bill may be swapped with that of the neighboring table. At lunchtime, your server may be called away while you're mid-order, by a bell from the kitchen — apparently, service staff do not want to keep the chef waiting.

And interestingly, the Glass Light seems almost purposefully obscured from the public. If you're looking for a menu online — or even a glimmer of what will be served that week or how much it costs — we wish you luck. The restaurant, already mostly hidden behind a hotel lobby, still lacks [more than a rudimentary website](#) and does not advertise its hours.

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Call the hotel's number for a restaurant reservation — the restaurant has no separate phone — and if you press the wrong button on the automated phone menu, you may accidentally find yourself talking to an operator in Asia. (For now, press 4.)

Though meals at the Glass Light cost far less in Norfolk than they would in New York or in Paris, it remains also an extravagance — both on your bill, and as a callback to the days when kitchen labor was considered expendable and enlisted in vast force.

And yet, it's easy to forget all of this when eating the egg.

Specifically, on the appetizer menu, order one of the world's most exquisite eggs (\$17) that is not made by Faberge: a humbly named “slow-cooked farm egg” that amounts to a form of magic.

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Executive Chef Serge Gouloumes works in the kitchen of the Glass Light Hotel and Restaurant on Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2020, in Norfolk. (Kaitlin McKeown / The Virginian-Pilot)

That egg is one of the things that made Gouloumès a known figure in his home country. And the shine has stayed on the dish years later in Norfolk. The egg, which rests in champagne cream sauce and is topped with black truffle and a fluffy “hay” of leek, is a deeply unlikely confection.

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Through a process Gouloumès will not reveal in its entirety, he has whipped the egg's white into a sphere of delicate meringue, but preserved the yolk runny within.

And so it is an egg that is no longer quite an egg: It has instead been reconstituted into a cloud. Once punctured with a fork, it rains its richness from within.

The dish's richness is balanced with sweetness, the acid of champagne, and the light bitterness of leek. But you don't really taste this dish with your tongue. You taste it with the little piece of yourself you've kept preserved since childhood — the part of you that still registers simple wonder.

At the Glass Light Hotel, every egg is perfect.

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Seared scallops are photographed at the Glass Light Hotel and Restaurant on Tuesday, Feb. 25, 2020, in Norfolk, Va. (Kaitlin McKeown/Virginia Media)

If you go

The spot: Glass Light Hotel, 201 Granby St., Norfolk,

The vibe: French fine dining in a light-filled hotel atrium, amid quirky fixtures and equally personality-filled

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Order this: You won't likely go wrong here, whether with fish or fowl or boeuf. But don't skip dessert, and don't miss that slow-cooked farm egg appetizer.

Hours: 6:30 a.m. to 11 p.m. daily. Breakfast till 10, lunch 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., dinner 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. Bar menu available between meal services.

Food prices: Small plates, \$10-\$24; pastas and risottos, \$15-\$25; breakfast, \$8-\$19; lunch entrees, \$18-\$24; dinner entrees, \$30-\$40; desserts, \$9-\$12

Drinks: Extensive wine list, \$10-\$15 by the glass; much less extensive beer list; house cocktails, \$11-\$14

Kid-friendly? It's not kid-unfriendly, per se — but I probably wouldn't.

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Vegan/veg/gluten: French food is not really designed for such things: vegetarian dishes are reserved to pastas and apps. But all restrictions will be accommodated.

Disabled-access? Yes

Reservations? By phone

Parking: Expensive and valet

Contact: 757-222-3033 (press 4)

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Matthew Korfhage



Matthew Korfhage is food writer for The Virginian-Pilot. For a decade, he wrote about restaurants, bars and beer in his hometown of Portland, Oregon. He accepts Dungeness crab and Upright Brewing beer by mail.

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