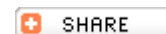


Willow Restaurant Takes Root

Area chefs combine talents with local business owners.

By Gale Curcio

Thursday, September 15, 2005



Louise Krafft

Charlotte Albers, Katy Moss Warner and Steve Nearman.

U.S. Rep. Jim Moran (D-8), state Sen. Patsy Ticer (D-30), Dr. Herbert M. Hughes, D.D.S., Rich Doud, Sean McLaughlin and Steve Nearman were just a few of the familiar faces seen at Willow Restaurant. The opening gala, which was held over Labor Day Weekend, highlighted the new restaurant, which features a "modern continental" style.

Jay Palermino and Mel Meadows, partners in the restaurant, are bringing their success with Hollin Hall Pastry to this new venture as special events and creative services/principal and specials operations/principal respectively. Chefs Tracy O'Grady and Kate Jansen are bringing their cooking experience to the plate. O'Grady was formerly the chef at Kinkead's while Jansen was co-founder of Firehook Bakeries. O'Grady will serve the executive chef/owner and Jansen as the executive pastry chef/owner. Brian Wolken, who was a chef at Colvin Run Tavern and Butterfield 9, will be the director of operations. Charlie Dunn, who was with Butterfield 9, is the restaurant's general manager and sommelier.

The grand opening was particularly special for Wolken and O'Grady, who had a short wedding ceremony before they opened the doors to invited guests for a series of back-to-back receptions.

By the time the receptions ended, over 650 guests had come through the doors, having a chance to taste a variety of foods and enjoy an open bar.

"It's a beautiful restaurant — very spacious but intimate at the same time," said Steve Nearman, President/CEO of Nearman Financial Consulting Inc. and president of the board of Child & Family Network Centers. "There's a private room that looks pretty good."

This 150-seat restaurant and 38-seat bar was designed by architects Sas Gharai and Lisa Rigazio. Warm mahogany wood is used throughout Willow, accented by tones of gold, deep purple and burgundy. Rich fabrics and 1930s-style photographs line the walls. Silver trays designed by O'Grady when she represented the United States at the 2001 Bocuse d'Or — one of the world's premiere culinary competitions — are one of the restaurant's focal points. Over a million dollars has been put into the renovation, transforming it from an ale house into a showcase. The owners made major changes to the interior and bar area, and created two semi-private rooms for seating up to 10 and one private dining room that can accommodate up to 35. A patio for outdoor dining will open next spring. They also expanded the central kitchen and added a new exhibition pastry kitchen.

NEARMAN THOUGHT that the food was "fantastic" and especially enjoyed the shrimp with a mild spice coating, the crab cakes and the thin pizzas that were served. He said that he definitely plans to go there for dinner. He wants to support Palermino and the owners who have been so supportive of the Child and Family Network Centers. As part of their modern continental style, the chefs will offer their guests new interpretations on French and northern Italian cuisine, preparing original seasonal dishes ranging from \$18 to \$29 for entrees.

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Appetizers include a selection of grilled flatbreads such as Blue Fire with caramelized onions, buttermilk bleu cheese, parmesan and fresh thyme, \$16; Braised Pork Cheek Ravioli with crispy sweet breads and thyme jus, \$10; and Fried Fontina & Prosciutto Fritters with lemon crème fraiche, \$8.

Entrees include several pork, beef, chicken and seafood dishes such as Mustard Crusted Miniature Rack of Pork with smoked ham hock jus and caramelized onion tart, \$23; and Buttery Bread Crumb Crusted Halibut with tomato broth, saffron poached potatoes, salted capers and orange, \$23.

Dessert lovers will enjoy the Willow's Chocolate Dessert, a parfait of bittersweet chocolate, mocha and white chocolate and crunch praline, as well as the Pineapple Crème Brûlée with coconut macaroon. The wine list will feature wines from the United States, France and Italy with some New World selections.

"The atmosphere was very cosmopolitan and upbeat with a Washington, D.C. flare," said Hughes. "The food [appetizers and desserts] was delicious and we are excited to have a complete dining experience in the near future. We've been to Kinkead's several times and have heard many great comments about Tracy O'Grady and her accomplishments. Best of luck to the chefs and to the staff at the Willow."



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