

The Majestic

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Editorial Review

Swank Transformation

Old Town's new Majestic gets the Armstrong touch

By Tom Sietsema

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**** 1/2 (out of four)**

If the beloved Majestic Cafe in Old Town had to change hands, a food lover couldn't ask for better caretakers than Cathal and Meshelle Armstrong.

The Alexandria restaurateurs were already offering sophisticated American cooking at **Restaurant Eve**, Irish pub grub at **Eamonn's** and chic cocktails at the speakeasy known as **PX** when they heard word last winter that the Southern-accented Majestic Cafe was poised to be sold or rebranded (one rumor had the landmark being recast as a sports bar). They worked quickly to save the charmer created and nurtured by former Washingtonian Susan McCreight Lindeborg.

Meshelle Armstrong admits she had a vested, and romantic, interest: She and her spouse hatched the idea for Eve, their first restaurant, over a bottle of wine at the Majestic four years earlier. Plus, "It's right here in Alexandria, and we thought we could do something with it." With great speed, and with the attention to detail that has long been their credo, the couple tweaked the original concept, shortened its name to the Majestic and began making former regulars very happy when they were welcomed back in May.

Always nice to slip into, the narrow dining room now looks as refreshed as a workaholic after a long vacation. The lighting is softer these days, but a vestige of the former cafe -- the black-and-white photos that could pass for a history course on Old Town -- remain on the walls.

Always something to anticipate, the bread basket holds delicate yeast rolls and herbed biscuits in addition to what might be the moistest corn muffins for miles. The involvement of Restaurant Eve sommelier and business

partner Todd Thrasher in the project almost demands that you order a cocktail. Few bars shake and stir as well as Eve and PX, and the honest drinks made at the Majestic assure us that they belong to the same family. The Tom Collins is tart and refreshing; the daiquiri is a detour to somewhere sunny, with perfect amounts of rum and grapefruit and lime juices.

Brief as it is, the menu is one of those documents that no one can veto because it has enough provisions to please most constituencies. Traditionalists can count on crab cakes and meatloaf; gourmets have whole sardines and a small but thoughtful wine card; and the littlest diners will feel welcome with cheese "toasties," house-made pasta, roast chicken and more - - everything tested by the Armstrongs' own "wee ones," as the menu calls children Eve and Eamonn. Executing the game plan is Shannon Overmiller, 31, plucked for her latest assignment from the kitchen ranks at Restaurant Eve. She has the good sense to check her ego at the plate and let a good idea get all the attention -- her food is engagingly unfussy.

Most every dish has one or two elements that make it special, and seafood is a particular draw. A first course of broiled whole sardines, set off with capers and soft cloves of garlic, and crisp with bread crumbs, is something any Greek restaurant would be proud to claim, while those crab cakes are mostly seafood and are garnished with a rousing dollop of remoulade that crunches with cornichon, and teases the palate with hot sauce and mustard. Warm soft-shell crabs, as an entree, are crowned with a cool and lemony headdress of pea shoots, causing an appealing dance of temperature and texture. Not every dish lives up to its potential. The meatloaf, two soft rounds of ground beef and pork, is bland despite its onions and herbs, but the entree has nice company in the form of buttery whipped potatoes, green beans that retain some bite and caramelized onions that slip from their skins at the touch of a fork. Rosier: liver cooked to a soft shade of pink, splashed with a winy and thyme-invigorated sauce, and sprinkled with bits of house-cured bacon. The pasta of the day is a safe bet, too, judging from the broad house-made ravioli I tried; stuffed with Swiss chard and draped in a lovely tomato cream sauce, the main course was substantial and stylish.

"Little tasty sides" tend to merit their marketing. English peas get a boost from lemon and mint; green beans are flattered with caramelized onion and crisp bacon; and the succotash -- now there's a dish that will get naysayers to eat their vegetables -- brings together corn, pearl onions, peas, beans and fresh thyme. French fries have a true potato flavor but need to be cooked longer. The Majestic also rolls out a few old-fashioned notions that add a dash of whimsy, among them a top-drawer Caesar salad whipped up at the table and a daily-changing icebox cake, homage to the old restaurant's habit of daily-changing layer cakes.

I'm saving the best for last. "**Nana's Sunday Dinner**" is a homey tribute to

Cathal Armstrong's Irish mother and a weekend tradition I'd love to continue if only my job didn't require me to move on to the Next Great Meal. For \$68 for up to four, the kitchen might send out a handsome, brined and roasted chicken, carved and ready to tear into; a big bowl of those buttery mashed potatoes, set off with pretty chive blossoms; a green vegetable (gratineed broccoli on my visit); and a tossed salad decorated with cherry tomatoes and hard-cooked egg. The only detail I'd change is the arrival time of the salad. I'd like to see it come out ahead of the parade of hot dishes.

When the savory courses are cleared, a whole pie follows, and even if you feel as fat as a tick for having stuffed yourself on seconds of everything, you will find it nearly impossible to say no to a slice of banana cream pie. Everything about the dessert is irresistible: the flaky crust, the vanilla-flecked custard, the mountain of whipped cream streaked with shaved chocolate and the unnecessary but welcome bowl of house-churned ice cream that helps crowd the table. The deal requires reservations and is subject to change (look for pork roast and potpies down the road). Groups of fewer than four guests are urged to take home the leftovers. I don't experience envy very often, but I admit to looking longingly at the mammoth doggie bag my buddy took home to his tribe the Sunday evening I got to pretend I was eating a home-cooked meal.

Each of the Armstrongs' venues has a tag line that sums up the property in a few choice words. At Restaurant Eve, it's "Nourish the Palate." Eamonn's has "Thanks be to Cod," while at PX, loungers are reminded to "Listen to the Ice." The philosophy at the Majestic is "Casually Swank," which is short, sweet, respectful of what came before it -- and right on the money.