

Sou'Wester

Sparkles in Southwest

By CELESTE McCALL



Grandma never made fried chicken like this, and when I was a child I thought hers was pretty darn good.

That is, until I tasted chef de cuisine Rachael Harriman's crunchy creation at Sou'Wester, the six-month-old restaurant in Southwest's posh Mandarin Oriental hotel. The crisply browned skin enveloped the bird's moist, succulent meat.

What? No blue corn tortillas? Green chili stew? The name "Sou'Wester" does not reflect the chili-dominated cuisine of the American Southwest; rather, it represents Washington's "forgotten," and smallest, quadrant, Southwest. The moniker also means "strong winds blowing from the southwest, which captures the essence of our restaurant," explains Mandarin's top toque, executive chef Eric Ziebold. "The connotations of a sou'wester, the quick change in [wind] direction and the burst of new energy.... we wanted to do something completely different, a concept that would be new for the city, our community and our hotel guests."

Yes, Sou'wester is different,



starting with the sleek, urban decor, which evokes anything but down-home, country cooking. No matter. Created by California-based Henriksen Design Associates, which specializes in hotels, Sou'Wester's interior consists of earth-tones of beige and brown with glossy oak wooden flooring and mustard-colored carpeting. Pale green patterned upholstery is punctuated with an occasional crimson banquette, a pleasant contrast. In the evening, state-of-the-art lighting

adds a festive sparkle to the whole scene. Strategically placed mirrors make the 115-seat dining area look even larger.

Passageways leading from Sou'Wester to the Mandarin Oriental's glitzy marble-appointed lobby are lined with jars of chef Harriman's home made pickled watermelon rind (her speciality, we're told), green tomatoes, carrots, other vegetables and condiments. Cherry wood tables are appointed with woven place mats and bowls of lemons

Clockwise from Top:
Crunchy fried chicken with coleslaw
Chef de Cuisine Rachael Harriman
Red Snapper with Old Bay Chowder

Photos by Andrew Lightman

and pine cones. (The latter came in handy when we needed a squirt of lemon on our fish; more about that later.)

We tasted Harriman's fried chicken on a bitterly cold winter evening, the night before yet another major snowstorm blanketed the city. Seated by the window overlooking the Washington Channel, we began with the complimentary basket of pastry chef Amanda Cook's fluffy potato rolls, corn bread and feather-light biscuits, accompanied by a dish of honey butter. Good start. Then we shared a bowl (thoughtfully divided into two bowls by the kitchen staff) of Maryland blue crab bisque, a rather frothy, well-flavored potage studded with crunchy croutons and plenty of crab morsels.

The before-mentioned skillet fried chicken (three generous dark-meat pieces, a drumstick, thigh and wing), came with good, tangy coleslaw, a bargain for only \$13. Upon quizzing our waiter, we learned that Harriman simply coats the chicken pieces with flour seasoned with garlic powder, thyme, paprika and salt and pepper. If you really feel like "chicken tonight," Harriman's lineup also includes her highly recommended chicken and dumplings. Meanwhile, my red wine-braised short ribs were surrounded with a wreath of chunky mashed potatoes and a vegetable medley of carrots, onions and celery. Priced at \$26, the boneless beef ribs were fairly tender. With such generous entree portions, we did not need the tempting side dishes of creamy grits, hush puppies or twice baked potato with minced pork.

However, Peter did find room for a small wedge of banana cream pie, recommended by our attentive waiter. Other sweet closures were carrot cake, apple pie and a brownie sundae.

Beverage director Carlton McCoy (an Advanced Level Sommelier), presents an extensive, wine selection in a burlap-covered binder. The list includes imported and domestic vintages, including several sensibly priced selections by the glass. I had a mellow Argentine Malbec (\$10), while Peter sipped a \$9 Sauvignon Blanc. There is also an All-American crafted beer list as well as cocktails concocted with house-made nectars.

Service was excellent, delivered by Humberto. Dishes arrived in a timely fashion—neither too rushed or too slow. Also: When we complained about the volume of the piped in rock music—fine for a night

club but a bit jarring for a dining experience—Humberto promptly turned it down. Dinner came to \$110 including tax and tip.

For Sunday lunch (NOT brunch), we were again seated by a window, this time in brilliant daylight. As we buttered our home baked bread, we were treated to a sweeping view of the Washington channel, where the late winter sunlight glistened on ice floes.

We noticed that Sou'Wester's midday menu was similar to dinner fare, but with fewer selections. This time, I chose blackened bluefish perched on a bed of Cajun-style rice, which was studded with bits of smoked pork. Peter opted for grilled red snapper with mashed potatoes. Both seafoods were perfectly cooked, very moist and flaky. Yes, the fish needed a squirt of fresh lemon, helpfully provided in the bowl next to the pine cones. A toothsome side order was spinach braised in garlic and olive oil. Our zippy Bloody Marys were garnished with giant olives, which seems to be a trend these days.

For some reason, dinner at Sou'Wester seems a better bargain than lunch, which came to \$82 (with just one drink apiece), including tax and tip. For both dining outings, we noted that many dishes are prepared with pork and other meats. However, Rachael Harriman's kitchen is sensitive to allergies and other dietary restrictions, i.e. vegetarians, kosher, etc.) and will prepare a dish sans meat.

The Mandarin Oriental offers valet parking for only \$7, and dining patrons may get their tickets validated for up to three hours. That is a real bargain, considering that establishments in other parts of town might charge as much as \$15 or even more. Providing a "green" alternative: The Smithsonian Metro stop (Blue/Orange line, use the Independence Ave. SW exit), is a few blocks away. ★

TOP TO BOTTOM: The interior overlooks the river.
Banana Cream Pie. Photos by Andrew Lightman.



Sou'Wester; Mandarin Oriental Hotel
1330 Maryland Ave. SW
202-787-6121

www.mandarinoriental.com
Click on Washington DC, then "dining"

Hours: Breakfast: 6:30 to 11 a.m. daily
Lunch: 11:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily
Dinner: 5:30-10 p.m. daily