



Seasonal Bounty at a Moderne Brasserie

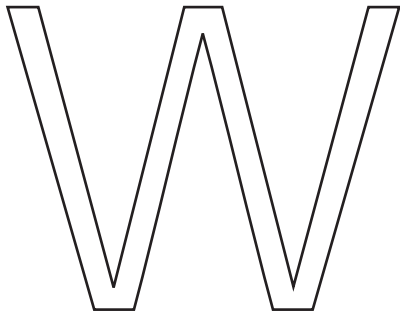
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Poste Moderne Brasserie
555 8th St NW, WDC, 20004
(202) 783-6060
www.postebrasserie.com

ABOVE: Chef Robert Weland shows off his organic garden, and much of its bounty enhances his eclectic menu.

LEFT: Plump ravioli pockets are filled with sheep's milk ricotta, accompanied by home-grown nettles, English peas, morels and black walnuts.



hat's for dinner? Many chefs turn to their walk-in refrigerators or freezers. But executive chef Robert Weland of Poste Moderne Brasserie simply strolls out to his patio garden and starts plucking. On Thursdays through late November, Weland, 40, may also walk around the corner to the Penn Quarter FreshFarm market at Eighth and E Streets NW. Weland, who graduated from the prestigious Culinary Institute of America, has cooked at several top New York restaurants. He arrived at Poste five years ago.

When we visited Poste, our first stop was Weland's organic garden, which he tends himself. Pots and raised beds overflow with oregano, basil, chives, lots of mint (including pineapple mint), colorful lettuce and heirloom tomatoes. Come fall, Weland will harvest arugula, succrine lettuce (similar to Romaine), Swiss chard, kale, onions, garlic and more herbs including agretti (a rather salty, Italian green) and hyssop leaves which have a slightly bitter minty flavor.

Situated in Penn Quarter, Hotel Monaco and Poste both pack in a lot of history. Would you believe this elegant hostelry was once a post office? To reach the 176-seat restaurant, I walked through the carriageway portal to the original sorting room of the circa-1841 General Post Office. I gazed up at its beautifully restored, 16-foot cast-iron ceilings and skylights.

Poste's main dining area has smaller nooks for private parties. There's a small, lively bar, along with high tables and chairs for sipping wine, exotic ales or fancy cocktails, while noshing on "bar food" like Kushi Washington State oysters, steak tartare (hard to find these days), and barbecue pork sliders. A glass case holds wine bottles, glassware, and framed certificates and reviews. A mirrored wall makes the room appear larger. "Dignified elegance," my husband Peter commented.

As I sipped a Chalone Vineyards Sauvignon Blanc from California's Sonoma County, I watched the bustling display kitchen where a half dozen chefs were hard at work chopping and slicing. Around then a platter bearing a stately looking roast pig emerged from the kitchen and swept right past me.

What was that all about? I later learned about "Poste Roasts," Weland's private dinners, served family style for 6 to 12 people. For \$27 each, guests may choose from the spit-roasted suckling pig, cappretto (baby goat), beef brisket, smoked squab,

poussin (young chicken) or wild Alaskan salmon. The dinners include side dishes (often from Weland's garden). Virginia wine pairings are extra.

Back to our own repast: Peter and I settled into a comfortable, striped plush booth and began perusing our menus. Weland's "contemporary American" selections are divided among "Ocean," "Pasture," and "Garden," food groupings reflecting Weland's commitment to sustainable farming. Our waiter, Jabaar, promptly took our orders. We had to pass over the tempting rabbit terrine, Farmstead cheeses (many from Penn Quarter's nearby Cowgirl Creamery), and steamed mussels. Instead, we

and we were surprised to learn that nettles, normally associated with the British isles, were thriving on bushes right outside the restaurant. My Central Coast (California) Pinot Noir complemented the dish nicely. Another pasta (poppy seed tagliatelle) is paired with braised rabbit, a marvelous Tuscan-influenced marriage.

Peter went for Alaskan halibut, perfectly cooked and encrusted with minced black olives. The fish was presented with tomato tartare (similar to salsa), along with green and yellow string beans. Die-hard carnivores could also dine well at Poste, perhaps choosing the Pineland Farms steak.



A popular Poste luncheon entree is chef Weland's grilled Cobb salad, with ultra-fresh ingredients arranged artfully in rows on a stark white plate.

began with a plate of lemony-garlicky escargot. Enlivened with what tasted like a splash of Pernod, the tiny snails were tucked into mini pastry cups. Delicious. I opted for the seasonal heirloom tomato gazpacho. Presented in a glass bowl, the pureed, chilled soup was flavorful, but marred with an incongruous dab of Dijon-mustard ice cream.

For the main event, I chose vegetarian pasta – a beautifully arranged plate of house-made ravioli squares plumped with sheep's milk ricotta, accompanied by home-grown nettles, English peas, morels and black walnuts. This combo really worked,

(Pineland Farms is a 5,000-acre educational farm in New Gloucester, Maine.)

Poste's entrees are modestly sized, so there is room for dessert. The "tasting of salted caramel" – caramel-flavored ice cream, creme brulee and popcorn – sounded intriguing. So did the strawberry rhubarb soda. But we settled on the intense, crimson-hued Market blueberry sorbet (made in-house), paired with almond ice cream and hazelnut mousse. This went well with our dessert wine: Liquid Love, a late harvest, California Zinfandel (\$8).

The only misstep of the evening involved our

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The intensely hued, house-made blueberry sorbet complements almond ice cream and hazelnut mousse. Photo: Andrew Lightman.

bread. The piping hot Parker House rolls, and the sliced loaf baked by pastry chef Jenn Flynn, did not arrive until we were half way through our entrees.

We returned to Poste in early August for lunch, and sat outside. On the sunny patio, each table was adorned with a tiny herb plant -- greeting us was fragrant rosemary. Peter ordered the soft-shelled crab BLT (\$19), but the kitchen had run out of it, so he settled on the Power Lunch. Priced at \$20.09, the three-course repast is a relative bargain. (In fact, because of the current economy, Poste is extending its Power Lunch indefinitely.) Offered a choice between soup or garden arugula salad, he went traditional with French onion soup. The rich, savory broth was well-laced with caramelized onions and topped with a wonderfully gooey slab of aged Comte cheese. For the second course (grilled chicken Cobb salad): velvety-textured avocado, dainty quail egg halves, brightly-hued lettuce, shredded country ham, Nicoise olives, and moist chicken white meat-- were all lined up in colorful rows on a white rectangular plate. A single grilled scallion was draped over the composition, which tasted as good as it looked.

I considered the Bev S grass-fed beef burger (from Bev S. Eggleston's sustainable ranch in Eagle Point, Oregon), crowned with organic cheddar, but I finally settled for the smoked duck Reuben (\$15), an exotic take on an old-fashioned

deli staple. For this huge sandwich (which I couldn't finish), slices of smoked duck, (from D'Artagnan) were stacked with pungent sauerkraut, melted Swiss cheese and Russian dressing, all piled between slices of dark rye bread. Among side dishes are mac-and-cheese and truffled pommes frites, wrapped in newspaper -- Belgian style -- and slipped into spiral metal cones.

The Power Lunch includes choice of dessert (excluding the selection of Farmstead cheeses), so we ordered lavender sorbet. Our waiter brought blueberry by mistake, but rather than send it back, we gobbled it anyway and found it deliciously refreshing.

Since it's located in a hotel, Poste also serves breakfast, offering continental selections (fresh fruit, juices and croissants served with Weland's home-cooked jams and jellies) as well as heartier bacon-and-eggs fare. Poste is not cheap; it's a special-occasion splurge. Dinner came to \$138 before tip; lunch was about \$50. Except for a few minor slip-ups, Poste service was courteous and professional.

Poste Moderne Brasserie 555 Eighth St. NW (Hotel Monaco) 202-783-6060
Hours: Breakfast: Monday-Friday 7 to 10 a.m. Brunch: Saturday-Sunday 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. Dinner: Monday-Thursday 5 to 10 p.m.; Friday-Saturday 5 to 10:30 p.m.; Sunday: 5 to 9 p.m. Bar menu: Daily from 11:30 a.m. to closing. ★

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