



Of Apples & Oranges...

Hello, I'm Ethan Warner. I write about my experience in restaurants as a customer. I did not go to a culinary school, thus I write for the love of food. Over seven years I've cooked for small town diners and cafes, pitted my way through rooms of dirty dishes at country clubs, and learned from master chefs like Kevin Walker. I have been in both front and back of house positions, bars, worked a variety of catering scenes, and have developed a defined appreciation for unique dining experiences. I now work as a direct support individual and am an aspiring writer and musician.

Morchella Provisions (West Jefferson, NC)

Friday evening I had the pleasure of being served by Morchella Provisions' staff and their Chef Josh Caine. Reservations are well advised if you want a table at this restaurant; the dining room is, like the menu, small yet sophisticated. Pastel paintings of fruit and inanimate table decor cover the walls: "Still Life" art or in its French title, nature morte.

Our night begins with some beers and diet cokes. To start, an order of shiitake mushroom gyoza, Peruvian tuna ceviche, and a bowl of roasted tomato basil bisque topped with creme fraiche (homemade sour cream) and a parmesan crostini. The bisque was not served with the creme fraiche promised, instead it seemed a drizzle of olive oil was used. Otherwise it had been simmered to a perfectly light and creamy texture, definitely it was taken care of as it sat stewing for a good while. Stirring soups is important to ensure quality results if you use high heats. High heats are desirable when breaking down or softening ingredients.

The tuna ceviche is slightly underwhelming for my guests, but tuna ceviche is known as a more bland starter plate. I recall my first time trying it at the Bistro Le Diplomate in DC. On the other hand, I believe the dish does a wonderful job of using a backdrop of the yellowfin tuna to bring out the sweetness of the roasted corn. Combined with cilantro, pickled onions, potatoes and fried wonton chips, the dish is definitely a step up from what I remember having in DC.

Chef Josh's shiitake mushroom gyoza is stunning. The ginger and ginseng ponzu sauce was mouth-seducing. The combination of heartiness and earthy flavors from the mushroom are brought to life on a pallet that will max out your tastebuds. When dipped in the sweet, citrusy and salty ponzu, similar to teriyaki, yet substantially more complex, I easily could have had another couple servings. I think the amount of flavor packed into each bite justifies the three mushroom portions. (please, just one more).

For dinner my company ordered the tuna steak, Lamb osso bucco, and a cut of prime wagyu. This time they were pleasantly satiated. I get the fettuccine alfredo topped with roasted vegetables. My alfredo, though seemingly simple as it sits in front of me, is perfect. The alfredo sauce is just thick enough, not too creamy and running away from the noodles but sticky/cheesy instead, hugging them with its flavor. It is topped with tender roasted squash, zucchini and crunchy bell peppers. I was surprisingly intrigued by the plating alone. It was plated with a wide rectangular plate, instead of the circular bowls pastas are frequently served in. It seemed to make the dish more filling. Noodles cooked tender but not soft, vegetables roasted to a tender outside, crunchy inside, and full of fresh garden taste, superb.

For dessert, the apple tarte drives it home. If chef's tarte were a woman, she would pull heads just by walking in the room. I will leave it to you to experience the dessert menu for yourself, as I adhere to a word limit but a word to the drivers: beware the after dinner espresso martinis here. They are strong and caught one of my companions off guard proceeding our beers.

The dining room is in dire need of sound-limiting renovation. Because the room is small, but sits roughly 30, dinner conversations of the night reached an uncomfortable volume. At one point I gave up on trying to talk. I think, for the otherwise opulent experience, it was a bit of a blemish. The choice not to have background music contributed I think. I find that some light Jazz blended into the background helps people keep their inside voices. As for the walls, I think wall curtains could also make a noticeable difference in the room. Apart from aesthetics, wall curtains are an effective way to dilute bounce-back. That being said, Chef Josh's talent is unmistakable and I left feeling like I had enjoyed every penny spent.

Successfully contrasting the culture of bang for your buck supersized meals in a convincing manner is always a challenge. Convenience is cheap, but the benefits of cooking with fresh, locally grown produce are far reaching. Morchella uses top quality ingredients, and offers a unique and poised dining experience. 10/10 for their food, 10/10 for their service, and 8/10 for their setup. I think a patio would be a great addition here.

