

The Stars Remain Bright at L'Etoile

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Every Wisconsin food enthusiast paid attention on May 5, 2005. That's the day Odessa Piper formally sold her nationally renowned restaurant, L'Etoile, to the brother-and-sister team of Tory and Traci Miller. On that day, many of those foodies probably wondered whether the restaurant - whose specialty was applying classic French techniques to Wisconsin's home-grown meats, cheeses and produce - would change in any way.

I know I did.

After two recent dinner visits with friends, I'm happy to report that, under the Millers, the restaurant is as wonderful as it's ever been. And for those who have never eaten there but who love food and its careful preparation, dinner at L'Etoile is worth a pilgrimage to Madison from any corner of the state.

It's not just the exquisite food. The wine selections available to complement each dish have been expertly chosen from all over the world. The servers at L'Etoile wear shirts and ties, but not formal wear, which gives the place a comfortable feel. Neither of the two men who served us missed a beat, and they often anticipated our wishes for extra bread, water refills or a little more coffee when the meal was done.

There are some noticeable differences in decor. The Millers brightened the interior by painting all but a natural brick wall a light beige. The color's official name, said Tory Miller, is Farmer's Almanac. That beige contrasts with a deep purple - named Eggplant - on the ceiling. Lining the walls now are black-and-white photos of foods, farms and some of the food producers. In many ways, the color names, the photos and a large map of Wisconsin on one wall, tell L'Etoile's whole story. From its beginning in 1976, the restaurant has worked to establish relationships with farmers and artisans all over the state. Each of those food producers is marked with a pin on the state map.

So the luscious New York strip steak (\$37) that a friend and I oohed over had been raised and aged at Fountain Prairie farm in Fall River. The Black Willow Twig apples that garnished a duck confit salad (\$11.50) had come

from Ela Orchard in Rochester. And the spinach that had been seared oh so slightly to accompany a huge pork chop (\$32) had come from Snug Haven farm in Belleville.

And that's only half of it. Each course in the two dinners we enjoyed surprised us with an array of flavors and textures so impressive that we found ourselves trying to isolate and appreciate each one of them. Tory Miller, who worked with Piper before taking over the restaurant's kitchen, studied at the French Culinary Institute in New York City and is a master of technique and flavors. (Traci is the restaurant's manager.)

"Here, this is chestnut, isn't it?" asked one of my dining companions halfway through that appetizer of pulled duck confit with wilted frisee, arugula and those heirloom apples (\$11.50).

"Yes," I agreed. But it wasn't any old chestnut. Before joining the apples and greens in the appetizer, that chestnut had been roasted with honey to accentuate its already sweet caramel-like flavor.

Distinctive flavors like this permeated every dish. That Fall River steak came from stock bred on the Scottish highlands, then fed on Wisconsin grass. Its flavor was so different from the normal corn-fed beef we usually get in Midwestern restaurants that I found myself pausing for a second, closing my eyes and trying to put its flavor into words.

Instead a picture appeared of a Wisconsin pasture in May, after spring rains had turned the grass Kelly green. I've walked through pastures like that on my way to trout streams and reveled in their scent. I was surprised that a single bite of exquisite steak could transport me back there. Beneath that steak was a sauce made with red wine and beef stock, bold with flavor but still subordinate to the taste of the meat.

The radish beside the meat looked like Christmas candy, with red and white concentric rings bared by slicing. The horseradish-scented potatoes also on the plate weren't overpowering and paired pleasantly with the beef. And the fresh spinach was so tender and so light that, if I'd been served it at age 7, my mother never would have had to threaten me at the table. The master stroke was a small dollop of butter, heavily braced with bone marrow, a rich ingredient that the French and Italians love but that few Americans even know about. It added yet another flavor layer to the rich beef.

Every other entree I tried could evoke a similar description. A tender, inch-

and-a-half-thick pork chop (\$32) from Willow Creek Farm in Loganville was much earthier than other pork I've eaten, and I appreciated the way Chef Miller and his staff had spiked its flavor with a hint of what tasted like allspice. The luscious, light pink meat was simply accented with a combination of its own juices and Cognac. More of that lovely spinach and a delicate casserole of potatoes accompanied it.

Skate wings (\$30) - those fins from certain small rays that are so highly prized by food lovers the world over - had been pan-fried with lemon, capers and parsley. All those ingredients provided a good counterpoint to the natural richness of the fish. And the beautiful, pink slices of duck breast tasted best when we sampled bits of roasted Golden Russet apple slice with each bite.

I've tasted the combination of bacon and salmon before, but nothing had ever been so rich as L'Etoile's Wild King Salmon (\$30) baked to an iridescent brown sheen with a broth made of smoky bacon bits and Sauvignon Blanc.

For appetizers, Chef Miller had drawn on his Italian talents. We tried paper-thin slices of beef carpaccio drizzled with a cream sauce and accented with Italian Stratevecchio and Parmesan cheeses (\$13), and a single, tender lamb rib chop grilled and then served atop a polenta cake (\$13.50).

One member of our party ordered soup - a light leek and potato made with fresh cream and dotted with smoked Jonah crab (\$10).

And while it may seem pedestrian, my fondest memory of my most recent dinners at L'Etoile was eating drop-doughnuts (\$8.50), each not much bigger than a walnut, served hot from the fryer with warm chocolate dipping sauce.

True, the Chocolate Vesuvius with Milk Chocolate sauce (a rich flourless cake, \$8.50) and the Pomegranate Crème Brûlée (\$8.50) with ruby red grapefruit were good, but I'd go back to Madison for another plate of those delicate doughnuts in a heartbeat.

Even if I had to walk.