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DINING SPECIAL



ART and Soul

Lots of Soul on the Hill, Plus Art

BY CELESTE MCCALL

Ensconced in the year-old Hotel Liaison, Art and Soul might be the hottest restaurant on Capitol Hill.

Thanks to its \$12 million refurbishing, the year-old Liaison--part of the upbeat Affinia hotel group--has come a long way from its modest Holiday Inn days. Its flagship restaurant, Art and Soul, was unveiled last fall. The name comes from the marriage of contemporary artwork and the Southern roots of chef/owner Art Smith, a native of Valdosta, Ga. Together with executive chef Ryan Morgan, they create traditional Southern fare lightened up with locally harvested sea foods, produce and other fresh ingredients.

In the Liaison's lobby, brightly-colored easy chairs encircle a bizarre, circular sculpture. Guests lounge under the scrutiny of six-by-six-foot portraits of Winston Churchill and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., painted by Phoenix artist Randy Slack. (Images of Mohandas Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher, Dwight Eisenhower and President Obama have been moved to the private dining room.)

Art and Soul is just off the lobby. The 221-seat (plus another 75 outside) restaurant is casually elegant with cutting-edge decor. Chandeliers resemble giant illuminated tinker toys. The high-energy din-

The chef's signature cornmeal hoecake is crowned with house-cured salmon, hackleback caviar, creme fraiche and caper berries. All photos by Andrew Lightman.

RIGHT: Executive chef Ryan Morgan takes a break in the private dining room in front of Randy Slack's painting of President Obama.

BELOW: Rockfish is wrapped in Virginia ham, and served atop mushroom risotto, asparagus spears and baby carrots.



ing room is separated from the thumping ArtBar by a gauzy-looking stainless steel curtain and a glass-enclosed wine rack. Cream-colored banquettes are tucked into padded nooks for intimate dining.

Tables, crafted from zebra wood, are graced by black slate fork rests and wooden bowls of kumquats. The latter look better than they taste. No worries; we would not leave hungry at Art and Soul. Our friendly, efficient server, William, promptly brought us a basket of complimentary skillet bread. Decadently drenched in butter, the soft chewy rolls practically melted in my mouth. Bakery items are made daily by pastry chef Karen Crawford.

As we were munching our bread, Art Smith greeted us and fellow diners warmly. In spite of hearing the same questions countless times, he graciously answered our queries about serving as Oprah Winfrey's personal chef, and what he cooked for Winfrey and her entourage for her post-inaugural taping repast.



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Frosted "baby cakes" (miniature cupcakes) are capped with whimsical toppings including a candied pecan, banana circler, chocolate candle.

"Oprah loves our signature dishes, especially the Brunswick stew," Smith told us. (Yes, he keeps in touch with Oprah, and his Chicago restaurant, Table 52, is a favorite of the new First Family, who retain their Chicago residence. "The Obamas are our neighbors," Smith told us with a hint of pride.)

Inspired by Art's comments, my Southern-bred husband Peter ordered the Brunswick stew appetizer, a tasty melange of pulled chicken, smoked pork, hominy and beans enlivened by a judicious dribble of hot sauce. The "real" version, Art explained, is likely to include "critters," maybe squirrel, venison and other game meats.

Opting for a second appetizer in lieu of an entree, Peter then dug into a tangle of crisply fried, grease-free oysters perched atop a bed of romaine and shaved Parmesan. Escorted by a zingy chow-chow remoulade, the dish was a savory take on a New Orleans po'boy, sans bread.

On a subsequent visit with another couple, we explored more "firsts," or appetizers. Our tablemates gleefully sampled and shared the Chesapeake Bay fry, an assortment of local oysters, clams and calamari. Joining the shellfish were okra and hush puppies. These delectable fried morsels were free of grease and breading, prompting a diner to invent a new adjective: "ambrosiatic." Another in our party described the spice-rubbed ahi tuna as "sublime, like silk." The fork-tender fish came with fried green tomatoes, a culinary match-up author Fannie Flagg would never consider. Accompanying the duo was Art Smith's house-made sour pickle relish.

A house specialty is the hoecake, cornbread traditionally cooked over an open fire on the back of a hoe after a hard day's work. Obviously, Art and Soul doesn't do this. But chef Morgan does treat this humble bread like culinary royalty by adding house-cured salmon and hackleback caviar. Dilled creme fraiche and caper berries provide the crowning touch.

Since someone had to order something halfway healthy, I chose the country Caesar salad. While the salad was appealing with crunchy little croutons, just enough cheese and delicious little white anchovies, the grilled Romaine leaves were left whole, making it awkward to eat.

Entrees run the gamut of meats, seafood and a vegetarian offering, butternut squash ravioli. The feather-like pasta pockets were filled with a delicately-seasoned squash mixture enlivened by a refreshing, lemony sauce. The light but satisfying dish was served with carrots and Swiss chard.

For carnivores: Beef short ribs practically fell off the bones; they must have simmered for hours. Complementing the meat were sweet potato hominy hash and maple-infused onions.

From the sea: flaky, flavorful rockfish was nestled in a light blanket of Virginia ham. The saltiness of the pork provided the perfect foil for the mild fish and mushroom risotto—studded with asparagus spears and baby carrots—pulled the dish together nicely.

Ah, the duck, served medium rare and beautifully arranged with duck sausage, tangy-sweet red cabbage and a hint of goat cheese, artfully arranged on the large white plate.

Chef Morgan's side dishes evoke warm memories. Macaroni and cheese was a rich montage of elbow noodles and lots of gooey cheese. "It's a childhood fantasy, tasting the way you dreamed it should," cooed one happy diner. Another side, spicy greens, was properly vinegary, its tartness balanced by just enough oil and seasoning.

Room for dessert? We found room. After eyeing the menu's chocolate pecan pie, pomegranate crisp and Moorenko's ice cream and sorbets, we settled on a plate of "baby cakes," the chef's favorite. Each of the six miniature cupcakes had a different flavored frosting, with whimsical toppings: a candied pecan, a banana circle, even a chocolate candle. As we passed the cakes around, we felt like 8-year olds at a birthday party.

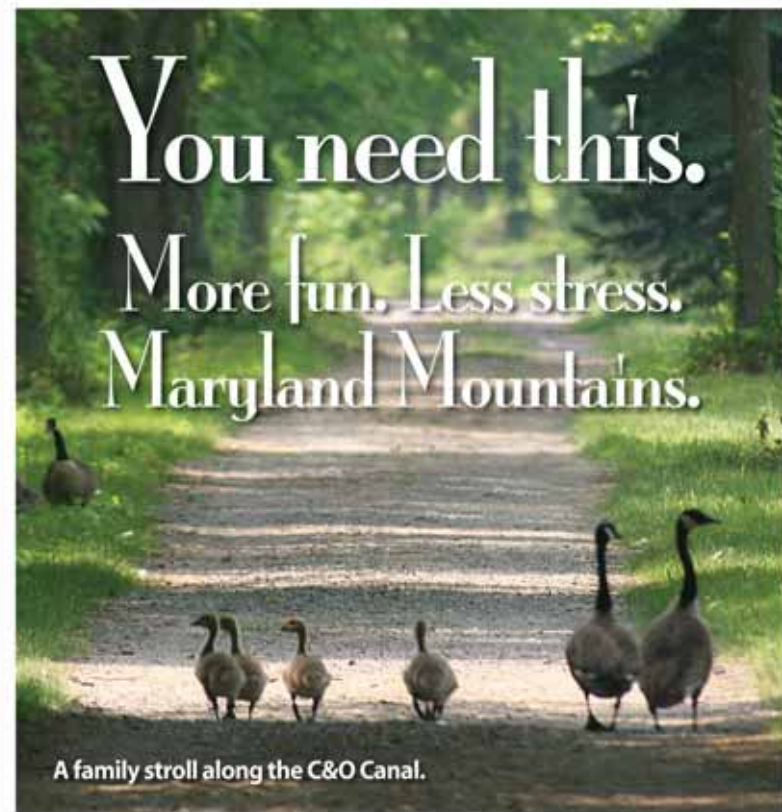
Art and Soul's wine list is fun to read and relatively gentle on the wallet. Priced from around \$40 and up, the international lineup is creatively grouped into such categories as "Bubbles," "To oak or not to oak Chardonnay," "Problem child Pinot Noir," "Big daddy Cabernet." Several nice vintages are offered by the glass.

With our fishy appetizers, we drank Ken Forrester 2008 Sauvignon Blanc from South Africa's Stellenbosch region, crisp and refreshing. The Mendoza (Argentine) Malbec—Cabernet consummated an ideal union with my rich duck dish.

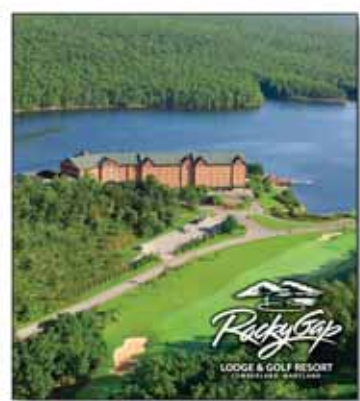
The cocktail list encompasses such fancy concoctions as Margaritas Perfected, Pink Elephant Martinis and "put-ups" Martinis, the latter accompanied by the chef's special pickled goodies.

Art and Soul is not inexpensive, but it's well worth the price. Entrees range from \$8 to \$14; entrees \$18-32; sides are \$6; most desserts are \$8. Dinner for two with wine is about \$125.

Art and Soul is located in the Liaison Capitol Hill Hotel, 415 New Jersey Ave. NW. Breakfast is served Monday through Friday from 6:30 to 10:30 a.m. Weekend brunch from 7:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Weekday lunch from 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Dinner nightly from 5:30 to 10:30 p.m.; until 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday. For reservations call 202-393-7777 or visit www.artandsoul.com. ★

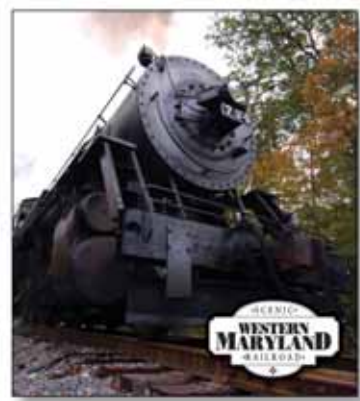


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