



## Local connections

BY ALISON ARNETT, GLOBE STAFF

The night was cold, and the sky was a deep midnight blue studded with stars and a sliver of a moon. Snow piled against the fence around a quiet garden in the Strawberry Banke Museum, the indoor/outdoor Colonial museum in Portsmouth, N.H., and a man in period garb led a group of visitors down a candlelit brick path through the charming antique neighborhood. As we stepped into the Dunaway Restaurant, a new place on the grounds of Strawberry Banke, it was necessary for us to pull ourselves out of the rich local history and back into the present.

Top-notch food usually doesn't go with historic museums, where you're lucky to get a cellophane-wrapped ham and cheese sandwich and a bag of chips in a cafeteria line. In a bold move reminiscent of the Modern, Danny Meyers's sparkly restaurant installed in New York's Modern Museum of Art, Strawberry Banke can now boast an independently owned fine dining restaurant. The Dunaway Restaurant is in the museum's former gift shop, and owner Jay McSharry, who operates several other Portsmouth restaurants, has redesigned the space into a two-story eatery filled with antiques, a mostly open stainless steel kitchen, and romantic (if a trifle too dim) lighting. Most importantly, he's chosen Mary Dumont, a Portsmouth native who cooked at Jardiniere and Campton Place in San Francisco and Blackbird in Chicago, as his chef. She brings a discernible respect for local ingredients and a finesse that gives the food distinction.

On a recent Saturday night, the streets of downtown Portsmouth are teeming with revelers despite the chill. The Dunaway is packed, too, as party after party of diners streams through the door and into the cozy bar area. We're seated across from the kitchen where young cooks scurry back and forth, as they and the young waitstaff seemingly struggle to keep up with the volume of diners.

Dumont's menu tends toward French terminology and fairly formal presentations, which is slightly at odds with the rustic decor. We start with rabbit rillettes wrapped in bacon, which are rich and good; the menu includes the dish in a section called "tastes," but the dish is nearly as generous as an appetizer. Chestnut soup, a giant bowl of it, had a beautifully smooth texture and a cloud of cinnamon-spiked whipped cream in the center. But it was almost too sweet on the tongue, a dessert posing as a starter. Endive salad benefits from a mustardy dressing, and unlike today's ubiquitous salads sprinkled with chunks of blue cheese, this one has a Great Hill blue cheese and walnut terrine under the endive. The only disappointment is the paucity of greens; we were left wishing for a more bountiful show of lettuces.

### DUNAWAY RESTAURANT

**Location:** 66 Marcy Street, Portsmouth; 603-373-6112

**Cuisine:** American

**Prices:** Tastes \$3.50-\$5. Appetizers \$8-\$16. Entrees \$19-\$25.

**Dessert** \$8. Cheese selections \$5-\$14.

**Hours:** Tues-Thurs 5:30-9:30 p.m., Fri-Sat 5-10 p.m.

Reservations accepted.

**Credit Cards:** MasterCard, Visa, American Express

**Handicap access:** Fully accessible.

**Very Good to Excellent** ★★ 1/2

★★★★ Extraordinary | ★★★ Excellent | ★★ Very Good | ★ Good | Fair

A salt cod brandade hews to the classic standard — whipped as it is with potato, olive oil, and garlic — and is served with crusty grilled bread. In a phone interview later, Dumont says she chose salt cod because the commerce on Puddle Dock, the 18th century seaport where Strawberry Banke is located, was centered around cod. Dumont is enthusiastic about using New England fish and beef, local cheeses, and, in the summer, produce and herbs from the museum's garden, located across from the restaurant. Her diligence in sourcing ingredients shows to best in the entrees. A monkfish stuffed with herbs and accompanied by braised artichokes, mahogany clams, and lima beans boasts many elements, but the fresh taste and sturdy texture of the monkfish still dominate. Casco Bay cod is a more subtle dish, the cod clean against the palate, a fluff of lemon hollandaise adding a dollop of citrusy brightness, and the underpinning of potato hash studded with bits of lobster rounding out the flavors.

But for a memorable dish, breast of duck in a deep red wine sauce wins the prize. The duck is layered over cavolo nero (the Italian black cabbage that tastes like a mellow radicchio), chestnuts, and a mix of tiny carrots and turnips. Little puddles of duck jus and a tiny pile of red onion compote add to the flavors. It's one of those combinations that seems better with each bite.

Dumont uses naturally raised beef from Wolfe's Neck Farm in Maine. Grilled in a simple bavette, the beef is excellent. However, my companion ordered it medium and the beef arrived quite rare, and the request to separate the beef from the accompanying potatoes with bacon lardons and wild mushrooms hadn't been done. We asked our server for more cooking time, and for the separation of the steak and potatoes, fidgeting a little through the waiting time. The beef came back on a dramatically long rectangular plate, still not quite medium but great to my taste. The steak resided at one end of the plate, the potatoes at the other, and the sauce Bordelaise was served in a little sauceboat — beef deconstructed.

Despite the quality of the food, though, the Dunaway experience can be a little ragged. Pauses in ordering and between courses are noticeable. At the end of the meal, the waitress asks if we would like dessert menus and we answer in the affirmative. She walks away, and stands chatting with other servers across the room; more than 15 minutes later, one of us finally gets up, goes over to her and asks if we could have the menus. Concord grape sorbet — Dumont says some of the grapes come from the museum garden — is refreshing, if not quite intensely grapey enough. A warm, deeply chocolatey cake gets a topknot of housemade marshmallow brulee to be golden and melt into the cake. It's a sophisticated version of a s'more, the campfire favorite, and a delicious innovation.

The virtues of Dumont's cooking and her connections to the region and its history are reasons to dine here. Smoothing out the service details would make the Dunaway irresistible.