

IN THE CHEF'S KITCHEN

From Sea to Tavern

Chef Eric Nelson of *Vintage Tavern* in Suffolk goes nutty over fresh halibut

BY CONNIE WEIS

PHOTOS BY KATHY KEENEY

DURING AN EXCHANGE OF EMAILS prior to my recent visit to *Vintage Tavern* in Suffolk, I said “huh uh” to Chef de Cuisine Eric Nelson’s question of whether or not he could include fresh morel mushrooms and ramps (wild leeks) in the dish he would prepare for this article. While both ingredients would be a treat for any diner, I explained that I try to present “chef” recipes that *Port Folio Weekly* readers could duplicate at home without mortgaging the farm.

Chef Nelson agreed to my terms, but as I found out when the delivery bell rang at the back door of this restaurant’s “dream” kitchen, when these precious items are available, don’t be surprised if they show up on the *Vintage Tavern* menu.

Straight from a specialty forager/purveyor in the state of Washington, the morels, ramps (and baby shitake mushrooms) were treasures any foodie would swoon over. It was a treat for me just to breathe in the bouquet of those gorgeous morels, which would later find their way into a house-made fettuccine pasta special.

Keeping the morels good company in the walk-in were three whole Columbia River Chinook salmon as well as organic beef and bison ribeyes. Other meats in that walk-in (some folks like to browse shoe stores—I like restaurant walk-ins) included in-house made/cured tasso ham, bacon, pancetta, pates, terrines and four different kinds of sausages.

All of the breads (including the huge trays of handmade dinner rolls I observed coming out of the oven) are made daily from scratch by Sous/Pastry Chef Kenny Reynolds. I have been experimenting with cornbread (without great success) for some time, so I asked Chef Reynolds for some pointers.



CHEF ERIC NELSON'S PISTACHIO-CRUSTED HALIBUT WITH ASPARAGUS

Chef Nelson napped the halibut with an expertly made lemon hollandaise and garnish of tomato concasse. The silky, buttery hollandaise was delicious with the fish, but if you aren't up to the task, don't worry. The fish is excellent as is; simply serve with a lemon wedge.

INGREDIENTS:

- 8 ounces** *raw, unsalted, shelled pistachios
- 2 tablespoons** Kosher salt
- 8 ounces** asparagus (preferably thick-stemmed, ½-inch or wider)
- ¼ cup** mayonnaise
- ¼ cup** whole grain Dijon mustard (either Maille brand or Grey Poupon *Harvest Course Ground*)
- 1 lemon**
- Panko** bread crumbs
- 2** (5-6 ounces each) halibut filets
- Salt and freshly ground fine white pepper
- *Chef Nelson buys raw pistachios already shelled. Roasted salted pistachios may be substituted, but extend a very light touch on*

Somewhere in the discussion the question arose about whether or not sugar belongs in cornbread. Chef Reynolds said no but includes it because of the preference of their guests. Then he told me what his grandmother had to say on the subject that went something like, “Some people put sugar in cornbread, some even an egg...if I wanted to bake

the salt when seasoning the filets. Consider shelling them as I do, the night before while watching TV!

METHOD:

Coarsely chop the pistachios with a food processor using on and off pulses. Strain the pistachios through a medium-mesh sieve to remove excess fine pistachio “dust.” *Chef Nelson saves and uses the pistachio dust in other preparations.* Set aside.

Set a rack in the middle level of the oven and preheat to 375 degrees.

Bring 2 quarts of water to a boil in a medium saucepan; add 2 tablespoons Kosher salt. Fill a medium bowl with ice cubes then add cold water to form a water bath. Set aside.

Trim asparagus stems with a Y-shaped peeler. Break off and discard tough ends (usually the last 1½ to 2 inches), then line up asparagus spears together on a cutting board and cut ends neatly. Asparagus spears should now be the same length. Tie bundles of 4-5 spears each with kitchen twine. Drop asparagus bundles into boiling water for 30 seconds, then transfer bundles to ice water bath to stop the cooking process. Remove asparagus, untie bundles, and wrap spears in paper towels to dry. Set aside.

a cake I would.”

Then Chef Reynolds brought out something he likes to eat *with* his cornbread, something he developed a taste for when his grandfather made it for him as a kid. It's called *sorghum* and it tastes like a blend of honey and mild molasses. I had never tried it before. Mental note to self: *Buy some sorghum immediately!*

Combine mayonnaise and mustard in a small bowl; whisk together to combine. Using a microplane zester, grate the yellow zest of the lemon directly onto the mixture. Squeeze some lemon juice (about a teaspoon) into the mixture; whisk together to combine. Set aside.

Sprinkle panko to a thickness of ¼-inch onto a *rimmed baking pan or pie tin; enough to accommodate both filets lying flat without touching. The panko acts as a “buffer” to allow circulation under the filets. Set aside. **Chef Nelson used a “sizzle platter,” available in all restaurant supply stores.*

Spread one side of the halibut filets with some of the mayo/mustard dressing, then coat (spread side only) with chopped pistachios. Use a tablespoon when transferring pistachios to the fish so as not to contaminate them with your fingers; leftover pistachios are great on a salad or dessert. Place filets (pistachio side up) on top of the panko crumbs, then season each with salt and white pepper. Bake for 10-12 minutes. *Fish should just start to flake on the edges and be opaque (not translucent) in the center—use the tip of a knife to check.*

Serves 2.

Chef Nelson seeks out and uses as many locally grown fruits and vegetables as he can get his hands on. The asparagus I observed being cooked was “fresh from the farm” as were the strawberries being featured that night in a strawberry and arugula salad. Fresh herbs (including the garlic chives sprinkled into the hollandaise) are snipped as needed from the

IMPROVING ON NATURE: (Facing page from left) Fresh asparagus, shelled pistachios and a Y-shaped peeler for prep; whipping up the hollandaise; and coating the halibut with nuts. Below is the finished product.

kitchen's own herb garden, nestled among the fish pond and outdoor tables where savvy diners enjoy after-dinner desserts and drinks.

Vintage Tavern bills itself as a "Seasonally Southern" restaurant. When asked how often he changes the menu, Chef Nelson replied "whenever Mother Nature tells us."

SMITHFIELD GARDENS BONUS SIDE TRIP!

Smithfield Gardens is right next to Vintage Tavern. They have an *excellent* selection of fresh herbs, and I left with French tarragon, sage and

fennel for my garden. When you dine at Vintage Tavern, allow time to visit Smithfield Gardens as well. Check out www.vintagetavernvirginia.com or www.smithfieldgardens.com. ●

SHOUT OUT TO ALL CHEFS IN THE SEVEN CITIES

Do you have a dish you'd like to share with *PFW* readers? If so, contact me at Ponderlake@aol.com and let me hang out in your kitchen for an hour or two.

-CW



ALWAYS SERVING A FULL MENU
11 A.M. - 1:30 A.M. • 7 DAYS A WEEK
DON'T MISS OUR SUNDAY BRUNCH!



2200 COLONIAL AVENUE
NORFOLK, VA 23517
(757) 664-9117

**Fresh
Soft Shells
are IN!**



FREE WEB ACCESS TO THOUSANDS OF FULL-TEXT MAGAZINE & NEWSPAPER ARTICLES WITH NORFOLK PUBLIC LIBRARY'S ONLINE DATABASES

24 HOURS A DAY, 7 DAYS A WEEK!

www.npl.lib.va.us/reference.html

You must have a Norfolk Public Library card and PIN to use this service. Call 757-664-READ for more information.

Spring Kickoff at Fountain Plaza



City Center Fountain Plaza If it's the weekend, it's Fountain Time. Entertainment begins here with live music among the amazing shops and restaurants!

Cracker

May 10

6:00-8:30 pm

"Cracker is the only American rock band that matters anymore" *El Pais*, Spain 2007.

Cracker may be considered a somewhat traditional rock band, yet singer/guitarist David Lowery's roots are anything but traditional. Rock out with this Americana favorite at the fountain!



Bring your friends, lawn chairs, blankets and dancing shoes. Beer, soft drinks & food will be available for purchase. Free admission and parking.

FIREWORKS IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING THE CONCERT!

Presented by the City of Newport News, The Newport News Economic Development Authority, And Newport News Town Center LLC. Produced by Virginia Arts Festival Productions.