

A close-up photograph of a white plate. In the foreground, there are several thin, overlapping slices of cucumber. To the right, a cluster of roasted red tomatoes is garnished with fresh green herbs. In the background, a small, round, golden-brown bread roll is visible. The lighting is soft and natural, highlighting the textures of the food.

Virginia's Newest Vintage

Adding innovation to tradition, Suffolk's Vintage Tavern has recast the classic Southern restaurant. CHRISTINA BALL digs in.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TYLER DARDEN

It took a few weeks of phone calls and schedule finagling to get all four of them around the same table at the same time. Like world leaders gathering for a summit or corporate execs for a power meeting, they came from near and far to meet with me at their ambitious new restaurant in rural Suffolk—Vintage Tavern.

Executive chef and managing partner Sam McGann drove all the way from Duck, North Carolina, a trip he makes weekly because it's there that he owns and operates the venerated Blue Point with partner John Power. Sam's wife—operations manager and partner Cindy McGann, a trained sommelier—zipped over from nearby Norfolk, where she was busy planning the Chesapeake Bay Wine Classic's upcoming auction. In a suit and tie instead of his usual "Dickies and duck boots," owner and real estate developer Brian Mullins had just ducked out of a Housing Board meeting in Richmond. His wife, co-owner Teresa Mullins, had the shortest distance to travel—she was just down the street decorating one of the spec houses in the Mullinses' Governor's Pointe development, a waterside residential community lucky enough to have Vintage Tavern as its neighborhood eatery.

With their distinct, complementary talents and shared vision, these four individuals (chef, sommelier/manager, developer, decorator) have joined to create what could be the perfect team of 21st-century restaurateurs.

Somehow I didn't expect such high-powered intensity from a sleepy corner of Suffolk. But, as anyone who's been to Hampton Roads knows, this is a region on the rise, and the Mullins-McGann team is a driving force, aspiring to feed this growing community with sophisticated style and a new take on Southern cuisine and hospitality.

After a few hours with this talented, talkative bunch, I wasn't at all surprised to find out that the next day they'd be flying off to Dallas to meet with the kitchen designer of their next culinary collaboration: a steakhouse, set to open next year in nearby Harbour View.

But first things first. Despite its proximity to the water (I crossed three bridges to get there), there's something incredibly warm and almost western about Vintage Tavern, something that makes me feel like I'm in a mountain lodge, an upscale hunting cabin, maybe a tavern in Telluride. Brian, an avid bow hunter and mountain lover, designed the building to evoke exactly the natural vibe I experienced. A pair of his elk and several mallard decoys grace the walls above the beautiful, mirror-backed wooden bar. Exposed beams and fine-crafted wood paneling bring the trees indoors, as do the sweeping windows. Both the private dining room upstairs and the luminous main dining room feature working stone fireplaces, and on the lushly landscaped patio out back there's an above-ground fire pit as well as briskly flowing water. Softening the stone and wood are touches like the rich curtains and upholstery, amber Arts and Crafts-style lanterns on the tables, and a well-chosen collection of fine oil paintings (including Michael Flohr's San Francisco tavern scenes and exquisite wine portraits by Thomas Stiltz) on the earth-toned walls.

A further sign of sophistication in this tavern with a *vintage* twist is the prominence it places on wine. An elegant floor-to-ceiling oak-and-glass wine closet in the dining room stores a coast-to-coast collection of 1,300 bottles including everything from Virginia chardonnays (Gabriele Rausse, Blenheim) to over 30 pinot noirs from California and Oregon.

Facing page, applewood cold smoked salmon with tarragon potato salad and pickled cucumbers. Above, Watercress and Empire apple salad. Left, a tasting of chocolate truffles.



Inside are 10 private lockers where regulars can purchase and store their own mini-collections for a song. As if this weren't enough, there's also a custom-built "wine shed" (inspired by the one at the Inn at Little Washington) tucked into a corner of the garden. Inside this temperature-controlled cottage lined with shelves are some of the rarer Bordeaux, an impressive array of Opus Ones and lots of growing room—the shed will eventually hold 6,500 bottles, not to mention a rake or two.

Vintage Tavern's artfully casual décor, wide-ranging wine list and impeccably trained staff of servers and sommeliers set the stage for Sam McGann's destination-worthy cuisine. So does the dramatic open kitchen, which, on the busy Tuesday night of my visit, was an exercise in elegant efficiency. Five young chefs dressed in white jackets and orange caps moved about the stainless steel-and-copper kitchen with cheerful focus as McGann, a dedicated culinary teacher and mentor, called the shots from the front service counter. Described by the executive chef himself as "seasonally Southern," the food at Vintage Tavern aims to strike a balance among traditional Southern recipes and ingredients, local and artisanal purveyors and culinary innovation. "We want to build a sense of pride around our food heritage here," says Norfolk native McGann, "to stay current without forgetting where we come from."

Not only does McGann still use Crisco in his biscuits, but he also cures and smokes his own pork bellies, ribs and salmon and pickles his own watermelon rind. Although the





Top, Sam McGann, Cindy McGann, Brian Mullins and Teresa Mullins. Below, Cindy tweaks a place setting; the gleaming kitchen; the Tavern's "Taste of Southern Goodness."

ubiquitous salad is given new life in McGann's kitchen. An essay in texture and flavor contrast, the firm and crunchy iceberg wedge is topped with chunks of Granny Smith apple, crispy, incredibly flavorful cubes of Benton bacon, toasted pecan pieces and a crumbled Maytag blue cheese so good it made me seriously question my devotion to Gorgonzola. Another surprising twist on the starter salad is McGann's warm mushroom salad with just-wilted arugula (both from local Dave and Dee's farm), slivers of grilled red onion and crumbled cornbread soaked in warm bacon dressing.

The Tavern's entrées are as varied as the menu's starters, and they balance out McGann's skill with seafood (so evident at The Blue Point, an Outer Banks dining destination since 1989) with an equally strong emphasis on beef, pork and game. I couldn't overlook his sweet, perfectly griddled jumbo lump crab cake, and loved how the sweet meat contrasted with a tart, peppery watercress purée and a harmonizing mound of herbed couscous. Sweet and smoky pork chops are brined for two hours in apple cider, then grilled and served with a

in hand, I bit into the tangy barbecue bliss and washed it down with a few sips of German "smoke beer," a pairing suggested by sommelier/manager Daris Gavin, one of the Todd Jurich's Bistro-trained staff members who traded Norfolk for Suffolk to become part of the Mullins-McGann team.

Now that it's winter, I want to return to Vintage Tavern to sit by the fire and savor dishes like McGann's grilled mix game sausages with marinated red onion and chutney mustard, his sage and rosemary roasted chicken and his grilled bison rib-eye with buttermilk chive potatoes, braised Swiss chard and brandy-peppercorn gravy. I can only imagine the wines Cindy or Daris will pull out of their cellar or shed to enhance such dishes.

After dinner in a cozy booth, I took advantage of another Southern tradition renewed at Vintage Tavern. Instead of retiring to the parlor, however, I followed several of the other guests out to the candlelit patio for dessert. On weekends, there's live acoustic music in the garden, but I thoroughly enjoyed the chorus of frogs and crickets who kept me company as I took small, satisfying bites of lemon

classic she-crab soup and house-made pimento cheese are also ideal intros, there's really no better way to get acquainted with traditional Southern cuisine done right than with the Tavern's "Taste of Southern Goodness." An appetizer big enough to share, this single dish gives diners a chance to reminisce and rediscover six traditional foods: a classic deviled egg, a curious glass of pickled watermelon rind, two golden, flaky biscuits filled with thick, salty country ham, a contrasting mound of Allan Benton's feathery American prosciutto, a brown mustard-dipped pork sausage link made down the street at the Bennett's Creek farmers' market, and three slices of toast slathered with the creamiest "Southern" pâté I've ever tasted.

"I was never much of a vegetable eater," Brian Mullins confesses as Teresa seconds his words with a *you-got-that-right* kind of look, "but now I can't get enough of Sam's collard greens with chili flakes and vinegar."

By subtly tweaking traditional recipes (shallots, cream and sherry soften the chicken liver aftertaste) with excellent ingredients and a bit of imagination, McGann has the ability to make you fall in love even with those foods you thought you hated. "I was never much of a vegetable eater," Brian Mullins confesses as Teresa seconds his words with a *you-got-that-right* kind of look, "but now I can't get enough of Sam's collard greens with chili flakes and vinegar."

Though it's a stretch to call iceberg lettuce a "green," this humble, once

miniature red casserole pot filled with cheddar stone-ground grits, one of the restaurant's truly Southern sides that also include herb-onion spoonbread and green beans sautéed with onions and bacon. The house-smoked baby back ribs come close to hitting that platonic ideal of barbecue-ness. When the waiter invited me to use my hands by placing a damp cloth and lemon wedge on my table, I put down my fork and reached for a molasses-coated rib. But the meat was so tender it actually fell right off the bone, back onto the plate. Fork again

chess pie and sipped a surprisingly good Australian moscato. After coffee by the fire, I only wished the little garden shed could miraculously transform into a guest cottage, a cottage stocked, of course, with some of the best vintages in southeastern Virginia—and maybe a pillow or two.

Vintage Tavern, 1900 Governor's Pointe Drive, Suffolk, (757) 238-8808, VintageTavernVirginia.com. Tu-Su from 5 p.m. Owners, Robert "Brian" and Teresa Mullins; executive chef and partner, Sam McGann; operations manager and partner, Cindy McGann.

