

LUNCH WITH THE CHEF

Southern Man

BY MONROE DUNCAN

Name: Sam McGann

Age: 45

Culinary haunts: Blue Point (Duck, NC), Vintage Tavern

SIMPLY THE
BEST: Chef
McGann (the
only one not in
whites) with
his staff at Vin-
tage Tavern

WHEN CHEF Sam McGann and I recently lunched at Saigon #1 in Norfolk, he asked for a recommendation.

I suggested my favorite, the number 86 — rich chicken broth, noodles, quail egg, shrimp, pork, watercress, bean sprouts, and fresh jalapeños.

After lunch, Chef McGann thought I might enjoy a cup of Vietnamese coffee with sweetened condensed milk. I'd never ordered it before — too much caffeine...zoom-zoom to the moon. After one cup I took flight, but it was quite good.

Over lunch, I learned that McGann, a Norfolk native, attended Norfolk Academy then Lynchburg College. He wanted to study art, he says, but he was a bit intimidated by the art department's dean's extensive artistic background and opted for a business degree instead. A good athlete, he played college lacrosse and football.

Having made a pact with his college buds, upon graduation they embarked on a three-month, \$35-a-day Eurail trip and then sailed to Greece where they "drank Retsina and ate fresh Mediterranean fish."

It was a culinary awakening for McGann.

"To the European cultures, food was everything," he explains. "I was deeply inspired by this passionate cultural gastronomy, the food, the *tour de force*. We stayed in hostels, pensions, and slept on trains. We drank wine from spigots on the wall and ate remarkable pâté smeared on sliced baguettes."

But inspiration for the Southern hospitali-

ty and cooking for which McGann has become known, came from closer to home.

"My dad taught me how to make Brunswick stew. I still use his recipe."

During a respite after Europe, McGann served up good neighborhood food at Clarke's in Ghent. That's where he got hooked on the restaurant business. He then received the "ultimate service training" under Joe Hoggard at the Ship's Cabin in Ocean View.

With Marcel Desaulnier at the Trellis in Williamsburg, McGann grilled bluefish in shallot butter and made Hatteras clam chowder as a line cook.

"A light bulb went on in my mind," McGann says of his experience at the Trellis. He understood that what Marcel was offering was fresh seasonal American genre cookery.

McGann was accepted to Johnson & Wales University in Providence, Rhode Island and graduated *Magna Cum Laude*, taking his externship at Al Torno, an American bistro-styled restaurant in Providence.

After a chilly, stark winter in Providence, he headed south to the Duck Inn, where he worked for Bill Miller, consulting and updating the fish house concept, while teaching at our local J & W campus. Later, he assumed the executive chef's job at the Duck Inn and found creative satisfaction in the preparation of wine dinners.



PHOTO BY KATHY KEENEY

After stints at Crawdad's and the Coyote Café in Virginia Beach, McGann, along with partner John Power, decided to open his first restaurant, the Blue Point Oyster Bar & Grill (now simply Blue Point) in Duck, North Carolina.

It was an immediate success. As an added incentive to the acquisition of a seasonal culinary staff, McGann and Power invested in a nearby house right off the beach to quarter the young culinarians. They're free to cook at night, swim, chase sand crabs and, if inclined, babes on the beach by day.

McGann's most recent venture, Vintage Tavern in Suffolk, has amassed exciting and flawless critical reviews. Plans are in the works for another Suffolk restaurant in late 2007. What is Chef McGann's secret to success in two separate venues approximately a hundred miles apart?

"The ever-present menace of mediocrity calls for untiring vigilance," as the motto (attributed to famed hotelier James Nassikas) attests on the Blue Point's website.

Besides being vigilant, McGann is a superb, exacting, and an untiring teacher. He mentors

his culinary team and works magic with pan-to-hand while each of his chefs stands close by heeding his every move, ingredient, and method.

For front-of-the-house expertise, vision, and knowledge of wines, McGann turns to his wife of three years and partner, Cindy McGann.

The chef's favorite restaurants include Coastal Grill in Virginia Beach, The Trellis and Fat Canary in Williamsburg, Doumar's, Sirena Cucina, and Bobbywood in Norfolk, and MK Restaurant in Chicago's Meat District. His favorite dishes include Asian-influenced concoctions, Doumar's hot Taylor ham, Pieces BBQ, homemade soups, fresh pasta — any slow-cooked food, lamb shanks, duck leg confit and stews.

I dare to say that Chef Sam McGann is not only at the top of his game but almost reigns alone as the premiere *chef de cuisine* of Hampton Roads. He has mastered "comfort food" while others have forgotten the meaning of the phrase, insisting instead that cutting edge is synonymous with quirky.

He concentrates on readily accessible fresh seafood, most of which comes from lo-

AWESOME NEW MENU!

- Both Locations •
- 255 Granby St. • Norfolk • 627-5800
- 1423 N. Great Neck Rd. • Virginia Beach • 496-3333