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The dining is fine at Phoebe's

By Melissa Pasenan, Free Press Correspondent

Perched at the bar at Montpelier's Restaurant Phoebe recently, I had a great view of chef-owner Aaron Millon plying his trade in the compact, open kitchen. As he trimmed the uneven white frilly edge from the fried local duck egg that would soon ooze rich golden yolk onto sweet grilled asparagus and paper-thin slices of prosciutto, shiny copper colanders twinkled above him on the butter-yellow wall.

The colanders have served as creative light fixtures since I first visited the restaurant in 2004 in its previous incarnation as Conoscenti's and appreciated the cozy but stylish space.

Millon and his wife Debbie smartly left well enough alone when they bought the restaurant two years ago and, with the addition of Millon's nicely conceived, well-executed food, it's now the kind of restaurant I wish were 10 minutes from my house rather than 45.

For those who live or work in Montpelier, I recommend popping by regularly for lunch or dinner to sit at the classy bar for the very good local burger served with hand-cut fries (\$10) or a plate of fried calamari with a spicy remoulade dipping sauce (\$10), followed perhaps by the salad of local baby beets, smoked trout and watercress sprinkled with toasted hazelnuts and a touch of crumbled feta cheese (\$8).

For those coming from further away, it's worth considering making the drive for a very good dinner with careful service in a welcoming atmosphere. The grilled, spicy-herbed whole spring chicken (\$20) will remind you how good chicken can be and the perfectly cooked meaty hunk of Artic char (\$22), a lesser known fish in the salmon family, is beautifully complemented by a light sorrel and yogurt raita, baby green beans and watercress.

There aren't too many menus in Vermont (or probably in the country), where you can order either a burger or pan-seared sweetbreads (the thymus gland, usually of young cows), crisp pillows of dense richness served recently with a deeply flavored red wine and Dijon reduction, bright green fava beans, and crunchy rounds of fried shallot (\$13).

That both are on the menu speaks to the diverse tastes of a small market; that both are very good speaks to the chef's diverse experience.

Millon, who originally came to Vermont from his native D.C. to attend New England Culinary Institute, worked at the Inn at Shelburne Farms before buying The Daily Bread landmark in Richmond (as well as the Richmond Corner Market) and trying to keep that legend alive while building his own dinner identity. After a brief stint at the end of the life of O down on the waterfront, he spent some time in the stable atmosphere at the Windjammer before returning home to Washington D.C. where he worked at the high-profile Equinox for chef Todd Gray.

It soon became clear, he explained, that he needed to come back to Vermont. "Todd said, 'You're not going to be happy unless you're in your own kitchen,'" Millon recalled. The other motivation was the

couple's two dogs, 11- and 12-year-old lab mixes. Apparently they missed Vermont as much as their owners.

When the Millons started looking for a restaurant space, the chef said, they had their eye on a few places but none in Burlington, where he thinks the overhead is too high and the market too crowded.

The Main Street restaurant — which he named for his sister — was perfect. "I like Montpelier. It fits my personality. It's wacky, but it's got a serious side to it too," Millon said. "We're not super-fancy," he added with a smile. "We have white tablecloths because the tables underneath are plywood."

He is also very appreciative of the strong local support, both from customers and the broader business community. "They put forth a pretty good effort to keep the downtown vital," he commented.

As the Millons build their business, they hope that they can become both a destination restaurant as well as a neighborhood favorite where locals will stop by for an espresso and a slice of pastry chef Matt Talbert's delicious and unusually light agave cheesecake (\$6) served with a sprinkle of sea salt beside it.

In the face of a slowing economy, Restaurant Phoebe is chugging along, slowly building its reputation and a devoted clientele. As long as there are people to cook for, Millon is happy buzzing around his open kitchen searing lamb chops to a perfect pink and setting them over a springtime ragout of fiddleheads, morels and fava beans or whipping up a garlic scape sauce to go with crisp-fried soft shell crabs.

At times like these, he said, "It becomes more important to really love what you're doing." The view from the bar makes it evident that Millon really does.

We want your restaurant, dining event, and food news for future Taste of Vermont features. Please contact Melissa Pasanen at mpasanen@aol.com.
