

New Hampshire

magazine

The Rebirth of a 1906 Kitchen

SUGAR HILL INN page 72

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Pan-seared duck breast with
confit, served in a pastry bag,
at the Sugar Hill Inn



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Bed, Breakfast and Beyond

Good hospitality from an inn is more than a comfortable night's rest. When the weekend includes a fine breakfast, afternoon teas and a superb dinner, your innkeeper has feathered the nest in silk. **By Susan Laughlin**

The weather outside is frightful, but my dear, the night is delightful. A snowy eve enrobed in the warmth of a cozy inn is one of life's greatest joys. Better yet, after lingering over a four-course dinner, your room is just steps away. This is the stage. How does it get set? Who attempts to create these engaging scenarios?

There seems to be a "hospitality virus" that lies dormant in some people until mid-life. At a point, their chosen careers seem tiresome, and they start perusing Internet sites designed for innkeepers. How exactly this "virus" works and manifests itself is another story, but for now, I will tell you the story of new innkeeper Steve Allen and the Sugar Hill Inn.

Allen, in his mid-50s, had owned and operated a shipping and packing business in New Jersey. He enjoyed success and he built a good nest egg, but it was time to do something else. Really, how many boxes can one fill with Styrofoam peanuts and still feel fulfilled?

Following his muse, he completed a chef-level class at the French Culinary Institute in New York City. His next challenge was to find an outlet for his newly-honed cooking skills. Usually, new chefs have to start at the bottom of someone else's restaurant. Allen, wanting to skip the yeoman's duty portion of the career change, decided to open his own place. But where? A bed and breakfast operation with a good-sized dining room seemed ideal. A few other prerequisites, like decent quarters for himself, brought him to the Sugar Hill Inn in May of 2006. The property was built in 1789 as a farmhouse and has 14 guest rooms, including several separate cottages and a perfect-sized dining room.

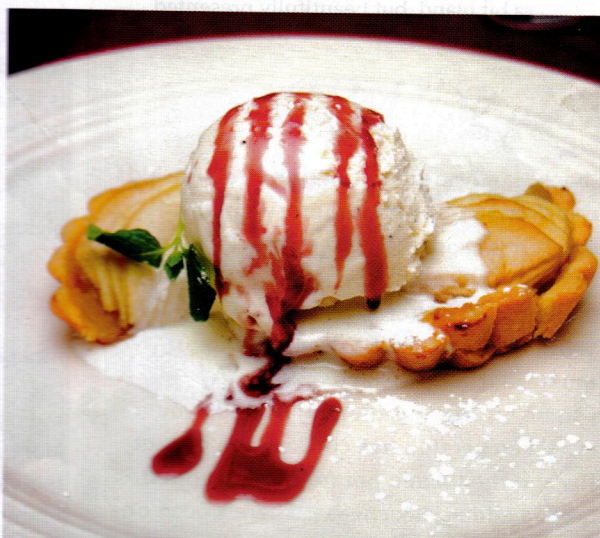
Sugar Hill, not far from I-93, is a quiet village that comes to life in June with the blooming of the lupines. The town was a favorite of Bette Davis, who stayed at the inn while her summer home was being built. Harmon's, a perfect country store with its own famous, aged cheddar cheese, is down the street along with the Sampler, the Sunset Hill House, Polly's Pancakes and the Hill-top Inn. There is not much more besides the incredible views, a

picturesque chapel and the serene peace. Perfect for a quiet getaway that is nonetheless 10 minutes from skiing at Loon or shopping in Littleton.

Running a B&B appears to be a two-person job. You find married couples and life companions sharing the job responsibilities. Allen, single, corresponded with Theresa Spear of Connecticut, who was also single and longed to become an innkeeper. They eventually met at an innkeeper's conference and decided to become business partners. The soft-spoken Spear handles details behind the scenes, while Allen, is out front and center, playing the consummate host.

At 4:30 p.m. Allen, in his chef's jacket, holds court in the bar. Guests wander in from their afternoon excursions and gather for a cup of tea. But Allen goes a little further this afternoon and holds a chocolate-tasting lesson on what makes good chocolate. We learn, among other things, that a piece of quality chocolate should break cleanly. After the tasting, Allen serves a variety of hors d'oeuvres. He is clearly enjoying this outpouring of hospitality as guests chat and mingle in his newly-refurbished bar.

Finally, it is time for dinner. Allen was the sole chef for the first few months, but quickly realized he needed to spend more



Innkeeper Steve Allen uses his culinary skills for breakfast and occasional desserts, like this apple tart served at dinner.

time out of the kitchen. He hired Chef Val Fortin, previously of The Mount Washington Resort, to concentrate on delivering beautiful dishes for dinner, while using his own cooking skills for breakfast and occasional desserts.

The dining room is a bit eclectic looking, with new designer wallpaper, but chairs leftover from its past incarnation, give the impression that renovation is still in progress. Windows on three sides let in bright sunshine for breakfast and give you a taste of the views you find farther up the hill.

Dinner at the inn is prix fixe at \$45 for four courses, a very good value. The menu offers a choice of four appetizers, two salads, five entrées and several desserts. Everything is made to order from scratch. Importantly, serving sizes are appropriate and you don't waddle away from the table wishing you had worn a Spandex jumpsuit. The wine list is respectable with several good-value wines.

A grilled pineapple served as the fruit course for breakfast

First to appear is an amuse bouche. This chef's treat to tantalize the palate is a good measure of what's to come. We find this "treat" an artfully arranged small portion of house-cured salmon that sparks our interest in the forthcoming meal.

Appetizer choices included a sampling of the chef's favorite soups; a trio of small cups just large enough to enjoy the taste of the squash-apple, French onion and clam chowder, with one extra spoonful to share with my husband. The homemade mushroom ravioli with sage butter and truffle oil are a big hit, too, full of delicately balanced flavor. Our favorite entrée was the filet mignon. I often do not order a steak dish because chefs just consider it a must-have dish for the menu, but beyond the taste of great beef, the shallots and sauce were very satisfying. I find the autumn vegetable stew a bit bland, but beautifully presented.



At about this point in the meal my husband was commenting that this experience compared favorably to our recent experience at fine New York City restaurants. Although not on the outer edge of "edgy," our meals and presentation were current with hot food trends, and we were happy to find this on the back roads of New Hampshire. Allen and Chef Fortin have a comfortable working relationship that allows Fortin to innovate, inspired by books and media, and Allen to encourage, with his recent exposure to hot dining scenes. After all, the food world is now just a giant global kitchen where food combinations and presentations are created and then copied at the speed of electrons. There is even some talk of chefs being able to trademark their recipes or presentations. Let's hope not, as too many lawyers will spoil the proverbial bumbleberry broth.

In all, the scale of the inn is comfortable. Cozy common areas allow guests to converse and mingle with the innkeepers or just enjoy the crackle of the fireplaces. These human-sized moments would be rare in a larger hotel. More rare would be the attention to the individual plates Chef Fortin is afforded in the dining room.

Allen's business philosophy is to exceed expectations. From the upscale evening dining to the luxury sheets and towels in the guest quarters to the fabulous three-course breakfast, he is right on mark. **NH**

Sugar Hill Inn
Route 117, Sugar Hill
(800) 548-4748
www.sugarhillinn.com

Dinner for guests and the public
Thursday-Monday, 6 p.m. to 9 p.m.
Rooms \$100-\$225

CheapEATS By Rachel Forrest

EBA's has been a mainstay in laid-back Hanover since 1979, and college kids and townies alike come in for the usual done right in burgers, wraps and sandwiches, but it's the unusual in toppings and some pretty wacky pizza varieties that make EBA a treat. A burger with chipotle mayo and jalapeno pepper jack cheese goes great with their beer battered Brew City fries, or try Hong Kong pot stickers made with turkey. A smoked Norwegian salmon salad with pasta and whole grain mustard is a rare find as well.

But you must try the pizza with some interesting topping combos you won't see anywhere else. The Thai Chicken version has chicken in a peanut sauce with scallions and mozzarella, and the loaded potato comes topped with mashed potatoes, bacon bits and cheddar jack cheese. There's even one with boursin and balsamic-marinated portabello mushrooms, or you can just make up your own with toppings like capers, salami and feta cheese. Of course, there are the old favorites with sausage, onions and mushrooms, but adding some jalapenos to that gives a kick and, despite the name, anchovy lovers will be happy, too.

There are specials every day and all-you-can-eat pizza or fajita buffets on select days of the week, as well as a great variety of subs, salads and fried dinners, with fish and chips or fried chicken. For dessert, well, you're near Ben and Jerry's turf, so ice cream is a must along with one of their big chocolate chip cookies. No anchovies there, of course.

Rachel Forrest is a former restaurant owner and now independent food writer who lives in Exeter. She can be reached by e-mail at rachelforrest1@aol.com when she's not on the road finding great Cheap Eats.

The Winter Wine Spectacular is the centerpiece of Wine Week in New Hampshire. The event is scheduled for January 25 at the Center of NH-Radisson Hotel in downtown Manchester. There will be more than 1,000 quality wines available for sampling, food from local restaurants and representatives from top wineries, including Gary Hogue of Hogue Cellars, Kate MacMurray of MacMurray Wines and Kathy Benzinger of the Benzinger Family Winery. Tickets (\$50) are available online at nh.easterseals.com. The event is sponsored by Riverstone and benefits the Easter Seals. During the event, special tasting seminars with limited seating are also scheduled at an additional cost.

During Wine Week itself (January 18-25), many wine dinners have been scheduled. These include Saturday, January 20 at Flag Hill Winery. (\$75) (603) 659-2949

Tuesday, January 23: Dinner at Rick's Café in Kingston, hosted by Jewell Towne

(603) 394-0600; Dinner with Gabriel Garcia-Luengos, owner of Bodegas Villacezan at Luca's Mediterranean Café in Keene. (\$70) (603) 358-3335; Dinner with Philip DiBelardin, vice president of Fine Wines for Banfi Vinters at the Rosa Restaurant, Portsmouth (\$65) 436-9715; Dinner with Bryan Page, owner and wine-maker of Page Wine Cellars at The Dunaway in Portsmouth. Call (603) 373-6112 for more information.

Wednesday, January 24 dinners include; C.R. Sparks in Bedford with Peter Merriam, owner of Merriam Vineyards; Bryan Page, owner of Page Wine Cellars and Mark Neal of Neal Family Vineyards. Call (603) 647-7275 for details; Dinner at 55 Degrees with the wines of VinLozano Imports and Gabriel Garcia-Luengos and Andrew Graff, owner of VinLozano. Call (603) 224-7192 for details; Dinner at the Hanover Street Chophouse with Claude Boudamani, winemaker for Clarendelle Wines. Call (603) 644-2467 for details;

dinner at the Hanover Inn with Bryan DelDondio, winemaker for FreeRange Wines and the Markham Vineyards. Call (603) 643-4300 for details.

Check the Liquor Commission's Web site for more details and other scheduled events.

We had a lot of fun in the office this past month. Our common area became "kitchen stadium" as we hosted five chefs for an Iron Chef-style challenge.

This challenge was the first real competition, but this is our fifth year of the Chocolate Challenge. We have brought in chocolatiers, cake bakers and pastry chefs in previous years, all for our readers' visual delight and a bit of chocolate booty for the office.

This year a panel of three judges tasted each dessert after it was carefully plated. Look for the results in our February issue.

— Susan Laughlin

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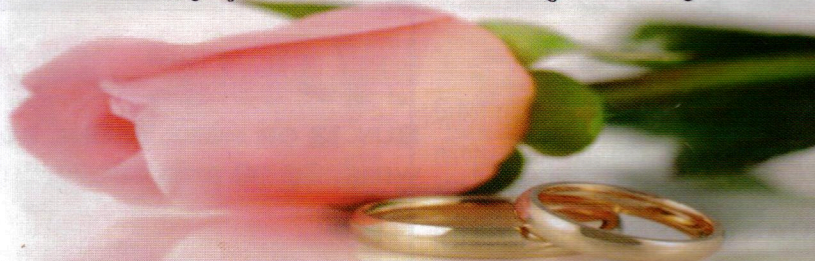
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