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# Dining Out: Plate after plate, cuisine stands out at Rockfish

By TERRA WALTERS, For Entertainment  
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Astaire and Rogers, Steven Tyler and Aerosmith, beer and pretzels, a hammock and a good book. Some things just go together so well. That's the case with the fit between The Rockfish and its new chef, Johnson and Wales-trained Aaron Archibald.

Chef Archibald's mission at his new post is to combine his own style, interests and talent with the traditions (and many of the recipes) established by former owner, the late and assuredly great Charlie Bauer. In its five years of existence, The Rockfish has carved a niche in the downtown-Eastport restaurant scene and our most recent visit proved why.

You know it's been a bad day when your response to the question about whether we would like anything to drink other than water was answered with a resounding, in unison "Are you KIDDING!?!?"

The Bombay Sapphire martinis (\$9.43) were made well, always a good sign.

While sipping, we studied the list of starters and decided on the calamari, the stuffed mushrooms and the Thai wings.

The Flash Fried Calamari with Chipotle Aioli dipping sauce (\$9) was a sure winner. The secret is in the flash-frying. It produces an optimal outcome: tender squid rings encased in a savory, crunchy and greaseless exterior. This was certainly one time when we made good use of the dipping sauce. Not only was it quite tasty in its own right, but it provided an excellent complement and ideal contrast in terms of taste, texture and color.

It had been a while since any of us had ordered Crab Stuffed Mushroom Caps (\$12) and these were an excellent way to reintroduce us to that dish. The mushrooms were tender and popping with flavor, and there was a lot of succulent crab included as well. The sauce was delicate and engaging; worthy of sopping (with bits of the French bread that had arrived warm at the table with our drinks), and sop we did.

We usually think of wings more as pub nibbles than as legitimate appetizers, but when we tasted the ones at The Rockfish, we were quite glad that we'd been in the mood for some. The Rockfish offers four different kinds (each \$9): Thai, Maryland style, Chipotle barbecue and traditional Buffalo hot wings.

We opted for the Thai Barbecue Wings with peanuts and cilantro and they were delicious. When we asked for backup in the hand-cleaning department (nobody wanted to wipe

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those messy hands on their napkin and then put it back in their lap), our thoughtful server brought each of us a warm moist towel arranged prettily in a little cup. High marks for that.

Having decided that a cold winter night was the right time for drinking chianti, we already were sipping happily on the 2006 Castello di Farnetalla Chianti when our entrees arrived. Once more we had chosen wisely.

The diner who was in the mood for steak had settled on the filet mignon (\$33) and hit the mother lode in terms of a half-pound perfectly grilled (over mesquite charcoal) tender and flavorful steak. The filet comes with a choice of side dishes (an intriguing array including corn pudding and fried green tomatoes) and the steamed fresh asparagus with Hollandaise sauce was the perfect choice. That sauce, plus the Bernaise and rosemary cabernet sauces that came with the steak, puts Chef Archibald at the head of the class. The filet also was served with a sprinkling of sauteed exotic mushrooms. A winner.

There is an interesting mix-and-match section at the top of Rockfish's entree list: five fish or shellfish offerings with a choice of three sets of accompaniments. The diner who decided on the Sea Scallops and Jumbo Shrimp (\$22) went with the Asian-style plating and received grilled fresh pineapple and jasmine rice seasoned with a spicy homemade yellow curry. Again, everything about the preparation and the presentation was pleasing.

Flounder (\$27) with a southwestern accent was among the specials on the evening of our visit, and again Chef Archibald showed off his chops. The fresh and delightful flounder again utilized the flash-frying technique and the batter, light and wispy, tasted as though there might be a bit of masa harina included. Corn, black beans, chilis, all played a role in this spectacular dish.

Today's rationale for trying dessert: you simply must try it if it's homemade. We made quick work of the delectable bread pudding (\$7) and chocolate mousse (\$7), leaving not one morsel of the accompanying ice cream and whipped cream behind either. What a satisfying meal.

There is a French quotation, "Plus ca change, plus c'est le meme chose," or the more things change, the more they stay the same. There have been changes at The Rockfish since its beginning, but happily some important things remain the same.

In addition to the high quality of their food (they make everything from scratch), The Rockfish continues its serious commitment to all matters ecological. They remain an EPA Green Power Partner, they operate on 100 percent wind power provided by The Clean Energy Partnership and Sterling Planet, and they recycle.

They also are members of Businesses for the Bay and Sustainable Annapolis, an environmental group dedicated to making our city carbon neutral. All that and superior classic contemporary cuisine with a predominant Chesapeake flair, two more reasons to go to The Rockfish.

A Final Note: Don't forget your valentine. And to paraphrase an old TV commercial, "Nothin' says lovin' like" .... something from someone else's oven. Take your sweetie out for a lovely dinner at one of our fair city's super restaurants. Rather have a quiet evening at home? Then tuck a restaurant gift certificate in with the flowers and card, and go next week instead.

Terra Walters is a freelance writer and editor based in Annapolis.

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