The Washington Post

WISHES COME TRUE AT EVENING STAR CAFE

Georgia is on my mind as I sink my teeth into a corn muffin that, along with a clove-scented sweet potato muffin, launches dinner at Evening Star Cafe in Alexandria. The golden snack sports a moist crumb and, unlike too many corn muffins in these parts, leans savory rather than sweet.

The South rises again in a first course of scallops, sweet, plump and sealed with a kiss from their brush with a hot pan. The seafood shows up on a cushion of corn cake with a dollop of chowchow, the vegetable relish that is used below the Mason-Dixon line as both condiment and side dish.

Serving the Del Ray neighborhood since 1997, Evening Star Cafe is a middle-aged restaurant that benefited from a facelift in November, an operation that included a change of names in the kitchen. Will Artley, a fixture in the back of the house for six years, now consults as The Restaurant Sage. Taking his spot at the stove is Jim Jeffords, a former line cook at the four-star CityZen in the District and a 30-year-old Georgia native who tucks that latter biographical detail into almost every dish on his menu. Boiled peanuts, anyone? They're among a handful of cocktail sops that also include peppers stuffed with pimento cheese and then deep-fried: zydeco for the taste buds.

There's not a lot to ponder on Jeffords's one-page list, but that's fine by me when the choices embrace something for everyone: surf, turf, rabbit food and a little shout-out to vegetarians.

Proof that salads don't have to be perfunctory: arugula decked out with strips of red bell pepper, pickled pumpkin and what appear to be croutons but turn out to be bits of fried pig's ear. The zing of the pumpkin, the nip of the greens and the subtle piggy notes will keep your fork busy and your mouth entertained. Jeffords's risotto, offered as both a starter and an entree, presents a swirl of arborio rice, black-eyed peas and dark greens punctuated with commas of tasso ham. It's like a Vespa ride through the back roads of Dixie; be sure to put it on your itinerary. Virginia oysters are gussied up with garlic butter, bread crumbs and hollandaise, a combination that's less of a mask than the description suggests: The fresh appeal of the oysters comes through.

I could make a meal of the dirty rice, upgraded from the usual Cajun version (which is stained from chicken liver bits) with the addition of crunchy hazelnuts and tart cranberries. The pilaf is the best part of an entree of routine sliced duck breast. Everything about the strip loin - big squares of rosy beef elevated on shredded cabbage and carrots - appeals to me, including its splashes of zesty barbecue sauce.

Only one meatless entree has been offered during my visits to Evening Star Cafe, but it's a quiet comfort of seared sweet potato dumplings, not too heavy, and presented on a puddle of melted blue cheese for welcome tang. A tuft of mache brightens, and lightens, the centerpiece.

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Southern charm evades some dishes. Jeffords' shrimp and grits is so restrained as to be pious, and the Atlanta food critic in my posse one evening passes on a second bite of the fried chicken, which I like most for its collards tossed with soft peanuts. (They're kicky with a reduction of champagne vinegar.) The biggest clinker is black drum, its flavor similar to that of red snapper, served with a "chili roasted butternut spiced squash sauce" that is all talk, no action. A garnish of chewy pork rinds does the fish no favor.

The crew at Evening Star is sometimes relaxed, other times hyper-attentive. I'm not sure which is the greater sin: being served someone else's meal or being watched as if by the Secret Service. No sooner does a crumb of food hit the table one meal than someone is there to brush it away - and break the rhythm of the conversation. "More interruptions than the 6 o'clock news," groused a dining comrade after the nth drop-by from the staff. Still, I appreciate the servers' good intentions, and the managers and hosts couldn't be more welcoming.

The ground-floor dining room looks much as it always has - like a dressy diner - only younger. The walls, hugged by booths, are a friendly shade of sunflower. A plush, double-sided blue banquette runs down the center, breaking up the boxy storefront. As before, there are whimsical touches from Washington designer Rick Singleton, who transforms Erector sets, among other ingredients, into eye-catching, thought-provoking art. The changes include a chance to make reservations at prime times but no noticeable sound-proofing, alas; there's nothing between the pressed-metal ceiling and the black-and-white tile floor to mitigate the noise a crowd can produce.

Adjoining Evening Star Cafe is Planet Wine, a retail shop owned, like the dining establishment, by the Neighborhood Restaurant Group. The relationship results in an astonishing number of wine options for a neighborhood spot. You can indulge in a 2001 Opus One (cabernet sauvignon) from Napa Valley with your hamburger - if you've got $260 to spare - but the mortals among us are more likely to choose from among the abundant wines offered below $40 a bottle.

Order the apple cobbler when your main course arrives. The dessert takes 25 minutes to bake, and it's the best reason on the menu to stick around. There's a lot to like, both in the black skillet (thinly sliced apples and a crisp topping of biscuit pastry) and alongside the pan (a pitcher of warm caramel sauce, and extra-strength rum ice cream hidden beneath a dollop of whipped cream and sugared pecans). The show costs $14 but can easily satisfy three or four diners, provided everyone knows how to share.

Returning to Evening Star Cafe after too many seasons away is like meeting up with a friend you haven't seen in a while. Sure, she's had some work done, you think to yourself. But she looks terrific.