



RUSTIC Diners sit among barnlike post-and-beam structures as the millpond's waterfall splashes just outside the window.

Photo by Wendy Carlson for
The New York Times

Comfort Food Kept Sophisticatedly Simple

A Review of Millwright's in Simsbury

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October 12, 2012

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WHAT kind of dining experience would you expect to have in a restaurant serving corn chowder, pork and beans, and fried chicken with watermelon? Almost certainly not what you get at Millwright's, where Tyler Anderson offers a brashly elegant take on these and other homey American classics. A winner on the Food Network show "Chopped," Mr. Anderson decamped this summer from Copper Beech Inn in Ivoryton to open his own restaurant in a historic West Street mill. His fans have been thronging the place ever since.

Fancying up comfort food is fraught with peril, and not every dish on Mr. Anderson's menu succeeds. Foie gras mousse topped with grape jelly and candied peanuts — "the house p.b.j.," our server quipped — was not only too coy, but unbalanced, the jelly overwhelming the duck liver. I also

wondered about the crisped puffed rice adorning an appetizer of fabulously fresh raw tuna, introducing an odd, breakfast note.

But far more often, the gamble paid off brilliantly. A starter of chicken with dumplings turned out to be a complex presentation of velvety smooth gnocchi, confit chicken and hints of mint. Grilled cheese and tomato came in two components: an herbed tomato terrine, delicately held together with tomato gelée, and a deliriously tasty grilled mini-sandwich of Cheddar and custard-soaked brioche.

Millwright's chowder arrives via a showy tableside presentation, with corn and lobster stacked in a bowl and then the soup — a thinned-out sauce vierge scented with anise — decanted from a porcelain pitcher. Fried chicken is also not what you might expect:

slices of an artfully constructed roulade are propped among miniature timbales of braised spinach. Mr. Anderson makes a sausage filling, or farce, from chicken leg meat, rolls it up in the thin-pounded breast, then poaches it sous-vide, dredges it in buttermilk and fries it in duck fat. Oh, and that watermelon? Pickled and cubed. This kind of preparation encapsulates the back-and-forth between classical and colloquial that is at the heart of his cooking.

And it's really, really good. Dish after dish showcased a deft, wide-ranging touch. Salmon was a runaway table favorite: a generously sized fillet, with a crust of black trumpet mushrooms, laid on a bed of chewy farro and topped with garlic scapes. A prime-beef duo partnered a halved strip steak, slightly blackened outside and picture-pink within — and filet-

mignon tender — with an even more unctuous short rib, drenched in a rich Bordelaise. Skate wing is not easy to prepare; the tough cartilaginous structure is a task to remove, and when overcooked the fish becomes rubbery. Not here. Seared perfectly, slightly crisp and yet fall-apart tender, a *buerre noir* sauce glistening in its corrugations, it possessed a buttery, lemony magnificence. Grilled lamb loin came mixed up with eggplant, yogurt, heirloom tomatoes and mint, making it vaguely Greek and entirely yummy.



A lobster bake entree with chorizo, mussels, corn, fennel and potatoes.

At every turn Millwright's serves up pleasing surprises — like the grilled plums and scatter of sunflower-seed granola enlivening a dish of sliced roasted pork loin, or the bits of chorizo in a lobster bake, a tureen of mussels, potatoes and corn topped with a butter-poached lobster tail and Hollandaise-like sauce. Squash-blossom fritters were not the bulbous blobs I'd encountered elsewhere, but pencil-thin, with the Parmesan-laden zucchini filling carefully piped in. We loved the flaky, fluffy cornmeal biscuits, doled out by our server like gems, with honeyed black-sesame-seeded butter. Desserts included a fruit cobbler that was neither too

sweet nor too densely packed, and a superb honey semifreddo whose futuristic architecture featured a Saturn-like ring of chocolate.

Mr. Anderson uses ingredients from New England, and favors what he calls the “grandma techniques” of pickling, preserving, canning and jarring. Everything is done in-house, right down to the fruit infusions used in cocktails. Herbs abound in almost every dish: a scrumptious coriander purée alongside the tuna; the vibrant green-goddess dressing with the salmon; the flecks of basil in a lemon sorbet. Fennel and mint figure prominently, adding a cooling depth, along with more unusual, specialty herbs, like the lemon balm in the chowder, also called melissa, commonly used in aromatherapy for its calming properties.

And there is something ineffably soothing about dining at Millwright's. You sit in a spacious room beneath the vaulted barnlike ceiling with its post-and-beam structures. The millpond's waterfall splashes just outside the window, creating a gentle susurration. The ambience is both majestic and rustic.

Complaints? Well, the type on the menu is awfully small. The ratatouille could be less heavy on the tomato. Our waiter was given to cloying aphorisms (“Sharing is caring!” he exclaimed, when we requested extra plates). But I'm grasping. I suppose some may want to nudge Mr. Anderson's balance of arty and hearty toward the latter. I'm not one of them. His is a cuisine that both dazzles and delights; sophisticated enough to impress, it's simple enough to make you feel at home.

DON'T MISS

THE SPACE Seating for 75 in a rustic and lavishly renovated 17th-century mill overlooking a dam. Seasonal deck dining outdoors for 30 more in a spectacular woods-and-waterfall setting. A downstairs tavern seats 65, and a third-floor private dining space will open later the month. Wheelchair access on all levels.

THE CROWD Well-dressed couples of all ages.

THE BAR A cozy basement tavern, open nightly from 5:30 p.m. “until whenever our guests are done,” serves upscale bar food in a small warren of rooms spread around a large stone fireplace.

THE BILL Appetizers, \$8 to \$18; entrees, \$25 to \$33; desserts, \$9. A notably eclectic wine list features 140 labels, most under \$50, accompanied by helpful notes and organized under categories like “Big and Bold” or “Deep and Dark.”

WHAT WE LIKED Raw tuna, corn chowder, tomato terrine, chicken and dumplings, squash blossom fritters, lamb meatballs, pork loin, fried chicken, grilled lamb loin, prime beef duo, roast salmon, lobster bake, skate wing, fruit cobbler, honey semifreddo.

IF YOU GO Brunch: Sunday, 10:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. Dinner: Tuesday through Friday, 5:30 to 9:30 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 5 to 9:30 p.m. Reservations, accepted six weeks in advance, are recommended. All major credit cards accepted. Free parking in a large lot in front of restaurant.