



Thornton River Grille

Anita L. Sherman

Photos by Molly McDonald Peterson

The Grille serves savvy, savory fare in Sperryville, just a stone's throw from the farms that supply the kitchen.

It's that time of year in Virginia when the leaves turn riotous colors. Their fall beauty lures locals and tourists west to seek scenic routes to Skyline Drive, Old Rag Mountain, or the Shenandoah National Park to take in their autumn splendor.

The historic little village of Sperryville, which sits about 75 miles west of Washington, D.C., is on the way and well worth a stop. Its eclectic collection of shops and galleries draw antique hunters and art appreciators. It is also home to the Thornton River Grille—a culinary diamond in the Rappahannock County rough.

It was the dream of Andy and Dana Thompson to open a restaurant where they could serve memorable food in a breathtaking setting. Since November of 2003, they have done just that thanks to their maestro in the kitchen, chef Tom Nash.

Better Than a Desk Job

Self-taught, Nash began his career in cooking while supporting himself as an electrical engineering student at Virginia Tech. "I quickly learned that I would rather be creating dishes in the hustle and bustle of a hotel or restaurant setting than laboring over a desk," said Nash, who landed a job helping the chef in



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the kitchen at the Hotel Roanoke when he was in college. Before coming to the Thornton River Grille some six years ago, Nash spent time in kitchens in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; at the Tikchik Narrows Lodge in Alaska; and at Tom Kee's Rail Stop in The Plains, Virginia.

Nash is not your white-coated type of chef. "That's just not me," laughs Nash, who sports a comfortable T-shirt. On this particular Friday afternoon, Nash has assembled one of his signature salads: a trio of heirloom tomatoes—Cherokee Purple, Pink, and Garden Peach—arranged playfully, topped with emerald green baby arugula and thinly sliced cave-aged Cardona, and drizzled with reduced balsamic vinaigrette.

"It's one of my seasonal favorites. I offer it, but don't have it on the menu because I can't always guarantee that I'll have the tomatoes," said Nash.

While local produce is abundant, local wines are equally available and offer fine company for Nash's entrees.

The highlight of Nash's career came last year during a serendipitous visit from world-renowned French chef Alain Ducasse.

Aged in stainless steel containers, the crisp, clear, and light Gadino Cellars Pinot Grigio is the perfect pairing for the rich and sweet denseness of the tomatoes. Nash also recommends pairing Linden Vineyards Claret, a medium-bodied red, with his pork loin, lightly bathed in a local apple cider glaze with juniper berries and served with garlic mashed potatoes and grilled zucchini.

Suppliers (aka Neighbors)

The menu at the Thornton River Grille changes four times a year. This season, broiled crab cake with remoulade sauce and beef tenderloin with tarragon butter are entrée mainstays. Nash also favors



seafood and prepares fresh, daily offerings. "Again, it's not on the menu, but I offer a fresh fish dish each day," said Nash, who gets his seafood from the same place that supplies Foti's in Culpeper and the Inn at Little Washington—Slavin and Son in Arlington. "They have some of the best seafood."

"My overall philosophy in cooking is to keep it very simple," he continued, "and to prepare local foods as much as possible." Nash gets ingredients from growers who are also neighbors. "As far as I'm concerned, Johnny Jenkins is the best in the business," said Nash of Jenkins, a local farmer who has lived and grown produce in Rappahannock County for years.

Several suppliers are less than 10 miles from the restaurant. That afternoon, Nash received a delivery of fresh green beans from nearby Belle Meade Farm. He is also keen on lamb from Cliff Miller's Mount Vernon Farm, which is practically adjacent to the Grille. And asparagus from Trista Scheuerlein's

Grilled Shrimp with Smoked Gouda Grits & Red-Eye Gravy

The Thornton River Grille makes its own seasoning for the shrimp, but chef Tom Nash recommends Chef Paul Prudhomme's Blackened Red-fish Magic seasoning blend in its place. He also suggests serving this dish with Gadino Cellars Reserve Viognier: "It has overtones of fruit—in particular, apricot—which works very well with the slight saltiness of the red eye gravy."

Preparation time: 30 minutes

Cooking time: 10 minutes

Serves 2

- ½ cup stone ground, unbleached grits
- 2 cups water
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 pint half-and-half
- ½ pound smoked Gouda cheese, diced
- ¼ pound diced country ham, with fat
- 2 cloves garlic, smashed but left whole
- ½ cup cream sherry
- 2 cups brewed coffee
- 4–6 jumbo shrimp, peeled and deveined
- Olive oil
- Blackening seasoning

For the grits

Combine grits, water, and salt in a medium saucepan. Bring to a boil and reduce heat to low. Simmer the grits, stirring frequently, until they begin to thicken. Stir in half-and-half and Gouda. Continue to simmer until thick (30 minutes or so), stirring frequently. When finished, remove from heat, salt and pepper to taste. Let rest for at least an hour before serving.

For the gravy

Sauté country ham and garlic in a very hot sauce pan. When garlic begins to brown, add sherry and coffee. Simmer over low to medium heat for about an hour. Salt and pepper to taste.

For the shrimp

Baste the shrimp with olive oil and season with your favorite blackening seasoning. Grill the shrimp until done—just until there is no translucence in the center. If overcooked, the shrimp will become rubbery.

Assembling and serving

Place the shrimp on top of the grits and ladle the red eye gravy over the top. A nice sprig of rosemary or chive makes a perfect garnish.



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Thornton River Grille

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Lunch: Tues.–Sat., 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Dinner: Tues.–Sun., 5 p.m. to 9 p.m.

Brunch: Sun., 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Closed Mondays

Chef Tom Nash (left) relies on the many farms just minutes from the restaurant to provide seasonal produce in season.

school-based Farm-to-Table Program down the road is bountiful in season, as are apples and peaches from area orchards.

A Special Niche

Nash attributes much of his success as a chef to the latitude he has been given to grow and change. The highlight of his career came last year during a serendipitous visit from world-renowned French chef Alain Ducasse, known for demanding that only the very freshest of ingredients be used. “I admit, I was nervous,” said Nash, who has served his share of politicians and celebrities, “but he was very complimentary and came back the next day for breakfast.”

Nash believes that he has found a special niche at the Thornton River Grille. With a staff of 15 and a customer base that includes committed locals as well as steady stream of tourists, the restaurant serves unpretentious dishes in a casual setting. Nash’s creations reflect not only his personal approach, but Rappahannock County’s plethora of farmers as well.

Award-winning writer Anita L. Sherman is the managing editor of the Culpeper Times, a local weekly newspaper, and was previously the managing editor of the Rappahannock News. She resides in Warrenton, Virginia, with her husband, Donald, and is working on her first novel.

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