



Rural Intelligence

Dining: Caught In Charlotte's Web

By Don Rosendale

Charlotte's Restaurant is my "local." It's two miles up the road from my Millbrook farm, and I've eaten at the site (including three prior restaurants with different names) at least once a week for the last 30 years. That comes to, give or take, 1,560 meals. The site of the present-day Charlotte's has a storied history. It began in the 19th Century as a church, then it was, briefly, a theater. In the Seventies, it was the Silver Horn, where steak and pasta could be had for what you'd pay for a quarter pounder with fries today. In the Eighties, it was El Borracho, which dished up tacos, chili relleno, and folk music. Next, it was Allyn's, owned by a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America.



Mikael (at right) and Alicia Moller stepped in seven years ago, giving it its current name, which means I've enjoyed around 400 of Charlotte's meals. Mikael is the chef, and he's as Swedish as the spiced-wine glogg whose incense wafts across the restaurant once the weather turns brisk. Alicia, who makes you think of Locust Valley and Lily Pulitzer dresses, tends the gardens that provide Charlotte's fresh flowers, minds the front of the house, and is especially proud at the moment of her dinner plate dahlias, which are... as big as a dinner plate. Mikael started as a restaurant apprentice in Sweden at the age of 13, had his own place called "New York, New York," which led in 1981 to his crossing the Atlantic to the actual New York, New York. After stops at high-profile Manhattan restaurants, he wound up being a chef for Charlotte's Catering, where he met Alicia, who was also working at the NYC based operation. They married, and, in 1989, bought the business from the Charlotte whose name was on the menus.

On their first trip to Millbrook, they "just fell in love with the area and knew we had to have a restaurant here," Alicia says. They bought Allyn's in 2006, renamed it Charlotte's, and closed the catering business' New York City kitchens to prepare the food in Millbrook.



The restaurant today sprawls over three zones. The place to be on a Saturday night, if you can get a reservation, is the eight-seat bar area where pine fragrance from a wood fire competes with the simmering glogg atop the bar. No two tables have identical salt and pepper shakers; each is unique and they've been collected from all around the world. In the bar area, you'll rub suede elbow patches with the polo and fox-hunting crowd, sometimes still in their riding boots.

The adjacent main dining room has flagstone floors and a wall-length mural depicting the Millbrook countryside in its four seasons. Like the bar area, it has a fireplace that is lit as soon as the leaves outside turn gold vermillion. Then there's the old chapel, now used mainly for catering, which has a fireplace big enough to park a Mini and a metal horse sculpture to match the 19th Century English foxhunting prints on the wall. In the summer, you can be seated at a table in Alicia's gardens while Mikael grills corn and beef over an open, oak fire.

But while it's the antique beams, the four-season mural, and Alicia's flower arranging that gets the Zagat "25" rating for décor, it's the food that brings people back again and again. The fish (rainbow trout, Atlantic salmon) is so fresh you can almost smell the sea, and the kitchen is lucky enough to have local Dutchess farmers bring in vegetables and cheeses fresh each morning. (Alicia's gardens also produce the restaurant's tomatoes, lemon thyme, and mint). They cure their own gravlax, sun-dry their own tomatoes, and freeze their own ice cream. Alicia points with some pride to the piece de resistance of the Fall 2013 menu, osso buco, on the menu for \$27. (Picture at right (c) 2013 Kathy Landman.) Normally a veal shank, at Charlotte's it's a pork shank braised in wine stock with farm fresh vegetables. The visual presentation would rival the photos in any \$50 coffee table cookbook. For cholesterol counters, there's oat-crusted rainbow trout for \$23, and for the budget conscious, a black Angus cheddar burger with fries for \$18.

There are some generous items on the appetizer menu, which I've been known to order as a main course, such as the tomato and mozzarella salad with mache (pic at left (c) 2013 Kathy Landman) instead of the customary basil (\$12), and sautéed Maryland crab cakes in a Dijon bearnaise (\$12). A holdover from the Allyn's menu is something called "Ajax fries," adapted from a restaurant on the Aspen ski slope of the same name, which are the traditional French fries tossed in truffle oil.

You can easily spot Charlotte's on Route 44—it's the place with the church steeple and the Range Rovers and dual-wheel pickups favored by the polo crowd parked outside. And it's worth the trip, even if you have to go further than my two miles.

Don Rosendale wrote his first restaurant review for a major NYC daily while he was still in college, when he became the paper's "Louis James" columnist. Since then he has written on food and wine for Town & Country, Gentlemen's Quarterly, Vanity Fair and was the restaurant reviewer for Westchester Magazine. He grows herbs for New York City restaurants at his farm outside Millbrook.

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