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Moro aims for, and achieves, the stars

The elegant décor and bright, New American menu fashion a dining pinnacle

A wise man once gave me some words to live by: "Son," he said, "if you're going to be a bear, be a grizzly." If you want to truly enjoy life, in other words, reach for the best you can get. If you seek good things, don't content yourself with good-enough.

And, if you're aiming to build one of Wilmington's most ambitious fine-dining destinations, you do it the way Moro's **Dining Out** owner and chef Michael DiBianca did: First, take one boarded-up old restaurant. Then, haul out 62 truckloads of demolition debris, throw in countless thousands of dollars, a professional designer, and the sweat of a lifetime. Stock the cellar with hundreds of bottles of the finest wine, create a menu that's one of the brightest in the state, and hire away some of the best staffers in the city.

At Moro, it seems, there's no room for half-hearted measures.

Step inside the handsomely chic main room, done up in warm tones with cozy wood accents, and coats are whisked away. Take a table by the quietly buzzing open kitchen and sink into the city's most bottom-pleasing cushions since the Hotel du Pont's Green Room. The 350-bottle wine list veers dizzily through Italy and France, California and Spain, full of top-notch, top-dollar vintages, but leavened with affordable treasures and excellent wines by the glass. An invigorating cocktail menu beckons with designer martinis, though moderation is prudent, considering the onslaught of food to come.

Take one taste of the little chef's treats that suddenly appear – the amuse bouches – and the



A venison loin special at Moro restaurant is accompanied by a cherry-spiked demi-glace and a tomato-scallion tart.

sense grows that Moro, Wilmington's newest challenger to upscale-dining pre-eminence, is reaching mightily for the crown. A simple sliver of cantaloupe sits on a tiny arugula leaf, drizzled with a vanilla syrup. In one bite, bright flavors burst out, come together sweetly, and then linger quietly, happily in the senses.

In that mere mouthful, it's clear that DiBianca brought a steady sense of orchestrating flavors when he stepped down as sous-chef of the highly regarded Restaurant 821 and embarked on his transformation of the old Silk Purse. DiBianca knows the countless possibilities of taste that ingredients possess, and seeks to show that capricious nature in his "study of food" appetizer (\$18).

Taking one ingredient – succulent Rhode Island oysters – he brings out three distinct personalities. Four are served raw, topped with cantaloupe, prosciutto and basil; four are raw with red onion, tomato and lime salsa and four are lightly fried and adorned with honey, grapefruit and basil. Each pleases in different ways:

Sweet, herbal tones give the first an earthy honesty; oniony notes make the next a robust treat; and the fat, fried oysters, while far less captivating, offer a tantalizing sweet-and-crunchy contrast.

Those earthy, but vibrant, accents give solid grounding to the other appetizers. Juniper berry-crusting beef carpaccio slices (\$14) are aptly joined by sweet chunks of crisp apple, just-bitter slices of endive and nuggets of hazelnuts. Crispy duck confit salad (\$10) is a robust, pleasantly salted success – slivers of creamy Parmesan cheese and crispy greens dressed with Meyer lemon are bright companions for the deeply flavored duck.

A woodsy tart of duck and wild mushrooms (\$12) is brightened by snappy accents of pears and a blood orange demi-glace (\$12). The deeply decadent joy of seared foie gras sits happily on its bed of Stilton cheese and chewy polenta, though the tart notes of vanilla-passion fruit vinaigrette do come close to overkill (\$15).

All through the meal, DiBianca shows his commitment to top-notch ingredients and solid execution, a steady sense for aesthetic presentation, and above all, an unwavering sense for harmony in flavor – just the things I loved about the dishes he once turned out at Restaurant 821. It is exciting, but somehow still soothing, and the regularly changing menu offers the heady promise of new delights to come.

You would hear little grumbling from this table, however, if the entrees offered this night stayed on forever: A crispy peanut-crusting grouper (\$25) gains a sweet counterpoint from its buttery sauce of coconut and ginger, and its bed of polenta offers fulfilling goodness. The beautifully striped skin of a rockfish fillet (\$24) is crispy and just salty enough to suit the flaky fish sitting in a pool of braised oxtail reduction sauce.

Deep, caramel-sweet accents of a tomatoey jus highlight the softly braised lamb shank (\$25), though compared to the fish dishes, it's more one-dimensional and less inspiring. Moro captures meaty fulfillment more successfully with a venison special (\$26) – bright tastes of

cherries sweeten a rich demi-glace sauce, and a satisfying tart of tomatoes and scallions accompanies the plump, tender loin.

All through such extravagances, service is unerringly pleasant and professional – possibly even more so because they were aware, in a

Moro
★★★★
(Exceptional)
1307 N. Scott St., Wilmington, 777-1800;
www.mororestaurant.net

Hours: Dinner Tue. – Sat. 5-11 p.m.

Dinner prices: Appetizers \$6-\$15. Entrees \$22-\$27. Chef's tasting menu ranges from \$40 for three courses to \$80 for eight.

Credit cards: American Express, MasterCard, Visa

Food: Former Restaurant 821 sous-chef Michael DiBianca has leaped across town and into contention for the finest fine-dining destination in Wilmington with his carefully balanced, impeccably executed and refreshingly innovative New American creations.

Atmosphere: Elegant and cozy, but coolly hip – stay in the main room for a more sedate refinement; head upstairs if a buzzer, more vibrant feel is what you crave.

Service: Easily among the most professional and smoothly efficient in the state.

rare breach of secrecy, that a restaurant critic was in their midst. Even though they knew, it's hard to believe the kitchen could have done a thing to improve pastry chef Nena Eckenroth's stellar desserts.

Warm apple pie (\$7) satisfies the soul with a cool mound of cinnamon ice cream and a vanilla sabayon sauce. The "study of chocolate" (\$9) brings together creamy English toffee bread pudding with banana ice cream, a tiny cup of bittersweet hot chocolate, and chewy truffles perfumed with passion fruit. Citrus *panna cotta* (\$7) arrives in a martini glass, all creamy and cool, with accents of blood orange, ice cream and a curl of crispy cookie.

A glass of good grappa or a top-shelf port might be the only proper foil for such richness, giving you proper pause to raise a happy toast to DiBianca's vision, to Moro's fine promise, and especially to the grizzly bear that lives in us all.