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Brilliant chefs make Copeland extraordinary

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I thought of that old T-shirt slogan: "Life is short, eat dessert first" after tasting pastry chef John Sauchelli's elaborate sweets at Copeland.

I still dream about the little dome of warm dark chocolate brioche pudding, playing off house-made milk chocolate ice cream and cocoa nib streusel. Or who could forget the magic maple cheesecake, with a delicate walnut crust and winter squash ice cream? It is, needless to say, completely unlike those way-too-dense pedestrian wedges you've eaten all your life.

So suppose you were halfway through dinner and a natural disaster or some other calamity struck, and you couldn't order dessert? That would be a tragedy. (The restaurant is located at 2 Whippany Road, Morris Township, 973-451-2619, www.westingovernormorris.com.)

But since New Jersey is not a typhoon target or prone to volcanoes, I decided it's probably not that much of a risk to order an appetizer, entree and dessert in the usual order. Besides, it would be a crime to miss executive chef Thomas Ciszak's creativity.

Here's an outstanding example: A poached egg atop braised short ribs (\$14) with parsnip puree and truffles. The elaborate multilevel interpretation thumbs its nose at the usual treatments of this cut of beef. The warm yolk adds another layer of richness to the meat as it yields with the first touch of the fork, and the truffles lend a touch of nobility to the ribs' peasant roots.

If you prefer something less complicated, there's the steamed Alaskan king crab legs (\$17), cut in pieces so it's easy to eat, which means you're not dealing with a messy tangle of shells. Seaweed salad and soy mayonnaise amplify the appeal of the crab.

Butternut squash soup (\$9) poured over diver scallops is delectably smooth, while pappardelle ragu (\$11) is another good use of those short ribs.

Moving on to the entrees, prime New York sirloin (\$39), a magnificent 28-day dry-aged rendition, sparkles with chanterelle mushrooms and a truffle jus. The presence of salsify, a root vegetable that tastes vaguely like oysters when cooked, is a characteristic touch for the chef, who knows how to make a dish stand out without losing focus.

Everything at the restaurant is presented beautifully. Gorgeous hunks of pancetta-wrapped tuna (\$29) arrive over lentils, interspersed with apple slices and highlighted by Austrian pumpkinseed oil, a symphony in primarily pale colors.

The German-trained Ciszak, whose résumé includes time at The Manor in West Orange, has been with Copeland since the restaurant opened two years ago. But Sauchelli, who did stints at Serenade in Chatham and the Gramercy Tavern in New York, arrived at Copeland only about a year ago, according to manager

Richard Ramos, who has been at Copeland for just a few months himself.

It's quite a team. New American food doesn't get any better than it is at Copeland. The handsome dining room makes a perfect showcase for their fare.

Though the space has a clean-limbed modern feel, it still reflects the area's Colonial heritage (it's near Washington's Headquarters) with white wainscoting and cranberry walls. The only downside is the noise factor when the place is crowded. The sound seemed to swirl around us, making it difficult to discuss the marvelous food without raising our voices uncomfortably.

That's a pity, because there's plenty to talk about, such as the maple-yuzu sauce that lends the right sweet-and-sour notes to seared diver sea scallops (\$29) against a mellow backdrop of squash puree and chestnuts. Yuzu is a Japanese citrus that provides a different note from the tartness of a lemon or the sweetness of an orange.

Other seafood dishes run from the horseradish-crusting crab cake (\$16 as an appetizer, \$32/ entree) with mustard-seed vinaigrette to sumac-crusting salmon medallions (\$27) with red beets and petals of meaty maitake mushrooms. The use of elements such as the yuzu and salsify that undoubtedly are exotic to many patrons adds a sense of adventure to the meal.

The crusting technique, which extends to the black olive-crusting lamb loin (\$36) presents another embellishment without overdoing it to an already busy lineup of bell peppers, raisins, capers and roasted garlic sauce.

Vegetarians will revel in the eggplant tarte (\$19) with marinated tofu and asparagus, a healthy treat if ever there was one.

There's plenty of food on the plates, so side dishes are unnecessary, but if you want to indulge, try the crispy fries (\$7) or the light, cheesy Parmesan gnocchi (\$9). Both are worth the price and the calories.

The wine list is eclectic and well-arranged, but definitely high-end. I always like to see a nice choice of full bottles for less than \$30. Why not help out those patrons for whom the food prices might already be a bit of a stretch?

Alternatives include some unusual cocktails (\$11), among them a ginger martini and white mango sangria.

Desserts at \$9 each are worth every penny. Very few places can continue the same level of excitement from appetizers through entrees to the final course, but Copeland carries it off in high style.

The look as well as the taste is exhilarating, and never more so than with the citrus tasting, served on a long rectangular white plate, with a blood-orange stripe running across it. A tangerine "Creamsicle" is set atop a poppy seed cake, with a hot blood orange shooter on the side. The warmth, the cold, the tang and the poppy seeds all play a part in yet another amazing dessert experience.

Copeland is an asset to the area and testimony to the brilliance of its chefs, whose expertise makes any meal there memorable.

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