

New Jersey

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MONTHLY

HOT NEW RESTAURANTS



Clickwise from left: Copeland's Seared Diver Scallops, Chef Thomas Ciszak of Copeland in Morristown, Copeland's Dining Room

COPELAND



MORRISTOWN

FOOD: American

AMBIENCE: Contemporary hotel dining room

SERVICE: Variable

WINE LIST: Good

DINNER FOR TWO: \$90

SOMEHOW I DON'T EXPECT MUCH FROM A restaurant at the Westin Governor Morris. After all, none of the hotel's previous eateries were worth reviewing. My first visit seems to confirm my hunch. We're seated next to a serving station, where we receive gracious but unsophisticated service. The food is a mishmash of flavors and ideas, some of which seem very strange indeed, such as a foie gras crème brûlée with a slightly sweet topping that is otherwise too salty to eat; and a strange chicken "pie" whose main ingredient, a seared chicken breast, sits on the plate next to an individual potpie containing nothing but vegetables in a creamy sauce under a puff-pastry crust. It turns out that the sous-chef is cooking that evening, and all these offerings are subsequently deleted from the menu.

Several weeks later we return, and what a difference, due in part to the presence of the new sommelier/general manager, Yasir Chaudhry, formerly of Gotham Bar and Grill in New York City, Venue in Hoboken, and the Ryland Inn in Whitehouse. Everything seems smoother, although the service still needs work; a hovering waitstaff is as bad as a negligent one.

The dining room, open on one side to the hotel lobby, is an attractive bi-level space with a square bar complete with TV on the lower level. The comfortable seating and rosy walls make a harmonious statement.

I assume that Chef Thomas Cizak, who used to be at Tavern on the Green in New York and the Manor in West Orange, is in the kitchen during my other visits, because the food then is very good, sometimes excellent. For example, one of my guests, from Baltimore—where they know crab cakes—doesn't believe you can make a good crab cake without Old Bay seasoning. Yet she loves these sublime cakes, filled with lump crabmeat bound with mayonnaise and with a crisp, brown horseradish crust.

Among the appetizers, tuna niçoise—silken tuna tartare topped with pungent black-olive tapenade and a ring of white an-



chovies and served with arugula and tomatoes—is a perfect mix of flavors. Mousse-like foie gras custard, served cold in two wedges with chopped-quince compote, is much better than the foie gras crème brûlée of our first visit. Hot steamed crab legs are moist and meaty, but the same crab legs served cold taste dry and stale. A New England clam chowder filled with clams, potatoes, and smoky bacon is as good as I've tasted anywhere, and butternut squash soup poured over slivers of smoked duck in a bowl at the table results in a fine flavor combination.

Main courses are almost as successful. Chilean sea bass with a chili-cinnamon glaze, accompanied by baby bok choy, a miso-lemongrass nage, and a large shrimp wrapped in potato strings, is one of the best. Honey-mustard-glazed salmon with golden beets and seared diver scallops with butternut squash purée, chestnuts, and a sweet, lemony yuzu sauce are both recommended. Tuna with apple-glazed pork belly tastes much better than it sounds; rare seared tuna is accompanied by green lentils and a piece of pork belly cooked in a sort of barbecue sauce, much like boneless spare ribs. A strong persillade (parsley and garlic) coating mars a tender skirt steak's hearty flavor. Filet mignon poached in red wine and served with braised short ribs is disappointing; the short ribs are superb, but the filet has a hard crust and, although it's served rare, it's dry inside. Noteworthy side dishes include the asparagus with a porcini ragoût and the kohlrabi à la crème.

Desserts are made by Michael Zebrowski, formerly of Bouley, Daniel Boulud, and Montrachet in New York City. Try his basket of tiny madeleines, or the warm and melting Valrhona chocolate brioche pud-

ding, or the two rectangles of peanut butter praline topped with chocolate and a milk chocolate mousse. Avoid the plate-size apple tart, with its soggy crust and musty rosemary flavor.—V. S.

Westin Governor Morris, 2 Whippany Road, Morristown (973-451-2619). Breakfast: daily, 6:30 to 10:30 AM. Lunch: Monday through Saturday, 11:30 AM to 3 PM. Dinner: daily, 5:30 to 10:30 PM. Brunch: Sunday, 11 AM to 3 PM. Wheelchair access easy. All major credit cards.