

What's in a Name?

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MORRISTOWN

FORTUNATELY, food reviews are not spelling bees. Otherwise Copeland would have been eliminated twice, and this is a restaurant on the way up.

It occupies a substantial corner of what is now the Westin Governor Morris, a landmark red-brick hotel that was originally named not for any governor but for Gouverneur Morris, the 18th-century New York lawmaker credited with writing the phrase "We the people" into the Constitution. (Morristown is named for one of his ancestors.)

In their recent multimillion-dollar upgrade of the hotel, the people at Westin wanted to replace a down-at-the-heels nightclub with a great American restaurant, and they decided to name it for a great American: the composer Aaron Copland. Oops. The extra E, the principals told me sheepishly, was already in the restaurant's logo by the time the error was discovered; anyway, they didn't want patrons pronouncing it "COP-land."

So Copeland it is. Don't cue "Fanfare for the Common Man," though: in style, ambition and pricing, this restaurant is aiming for the heights.

The executive chef, Thomas Ciszak, is a 34-year-old native of [Germany](#) who came to the [United States](#) a decade ago and swiftly rose to two of the most demanding restaurant jobs in the metropolitan area: banquet chef at Tavern on the Green in [Manhattan](#), then executive chef at the Manor in West Orange.

At Copeland, which opened nine months ago, Mr. Ciszak (pronounced SIZZ-ahk) was given the chance to work on a smaller canvas and to control every phase of the operation. And while his menu is concise and understated - "I didn't want to scare anyone away," he told me - it leaves no doubt that a serious culinary mind is at work. Consider the appetizer called foie gras "brûlée." I must say the name aroused my suspicions: it sounded like a first-ballot shoo-in for the cholesterol hall of fame. Somehow, though, the custardy crème brûlée managed to stay in the background, a lush but barely sweet delivery vehicle for the foie gras - whose richness was neatly counterbalanced by a jelly of aged balsamic vinegar and an exquisite compote of sliced plum.

The menu here is seasonal, so you'll have to wait till next year for the gingered cucumber soup, a whimsical pale-green cocktail of puréed cucumber, wasabi, citrus oils, pearls of tapioca and cucumber, and a plump and perfect Kumamoto oyster. Tuna tartare uses many of the same ingredients (minus the oyster) to achieve a very different kind of dish, brilliantly focused in its contrasts of flavors and textures.

Also at that level is the crab cake, in which the main ingredient is allowed to speak for itself, without fear or filler. Alaskan king crab legs, served in easy-to-handle segments in a steamer basket, are remarkably moist and meaty. The shrimp salad is very fine, too, the lightly seared jumbo shrimp lifted by a vigorous mélange of greens and fresh herbs.

Main courses at Copeland are eloquent in their advocacy of their central ingredients. Rack of lamb, vivid and almost puckery, comes with a dusting of roasted garlic, crisp Parmesan gnocchi and a rich-tasting tart of eggplant and eggplant caviar, all of it bound by a pinot noir reduction. (You can order the tart as a vegetarian main course for just \$15, and it's a clear winner, with sides of thyme-scented artichoke, fennel, pickled ramps and a dense little tofu cake.)

Three of four seafood entrees are first-rate: Chilean sea bass glazed with chili and cinnamon, seared ahi tuna, and salmon glazed with honey mustard and served with sweet golden beets and horseradish foam. Hawaiian marlin, though highly recommended by the server, was chewy, almost rubbery, and a lavender crust acted as a perfume that all but obliterated the marlin's flavor.

Chicken pot pie was likewise ill conceived. The chicken breast, grilled and served on the side, was flavorful but dry, and the pie crust was so punishingly rich it might have been pure butter. But filet mignon attained a character this cut usually lacks: Mr. Ciszak poached it in zinfandel before searing it, and he served it with wonderfully tender and meaty short ribs, with red-shallot confit and a celery-root purée that can stand in for mashed potatoes on my plate any time.

The pastry chef at Copeland is Michael Zebrowski, whose previous stops include Bouley and Montrachet in Manhattan. His first-rate desserts include a dense and powerful chocolate-brioche bread pudding, fabulously gooey and gleaming like patent leather; a mellow, lemony pear tart; and ice creams and sorbets in such fetching and unexpected flavors as basil and corn.

Before it was a restaurant, before it was a nightclub, the space inhabited by Copeland was the hotel's swimming pool. You can still catch hints of it in the sloping floor and the tiled steps that lead down to part of the dining room. I wish the makeover had been more

playful or exotic, though; the place still feels like a hotel dining room, dim and staid, its red colonial walls covered by generic Great Paintings.

The service is a work in progress; on our first visit, though the server couldn't have been friendlier, the waits between courses were interminable.

Copeland clearly needed a strong manager, and it has just hired an all-star: Yasir Chaudhry, formerly of the Ryland Inn in Whitehouse, where he was also sommelier. He has his work cut out for him. Food this good deserves impeccable service and an enveloping ambience. Did I spell that right?

Copeland

Westin Governor Morris
2 Whippany Road
Morristown, NJ
(973) 451-2619

VERY GOOD

ATMOSPHERE A 100-seat hotel dining room, with generic décor. Spacious and comfortable, though music from the large open bar can be loud. Dress: business casual.

SERVICE Cordial and professional, but sometimes painfully slow.

SMOKING Allowed at one end of the bar; smoke is not a problem in the dining room.

WINE LIST Mainly American, intelligently assembled and fairly priced. With the recent arrival of an excellent sommelier, wine service should be among the state's best.

RECOMMENDED DISHES Raw oysters, tuna tartare, crab cake, braised short ribs, Alaskan king crab legs, foie gras "brûlée"; Chilean sea bass, seared ahi tuna, glazed salmon, filet mignon with short ribs, rack of lamb, eggplant tart; chocolate brioche pudding, gewürztraminer-poached pear, ice creams and sorbets.

PRICE RANGE Breakfast: buffet, \$16; entrees, \$7 to \$12. Lunch: three-course "express" menu, \$19; à la carte entrees, \$11 to \$25. Dinner: raw bar, \$9 to \$17 (platters, \$29 to \$99; oysters, \$26 a dozen); appetizers, \$6 to \$17; entrees, \$15 to \$38; desserts, \$8.

HOURS Open daily. Breakfast, 6:30 to 10:30 a.m.; lunch, Monday to Saturday, 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; brunch, Sunday, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.; dinner, 5:30 to 9:30 p.m. daily.

CREDIT CARDS American Express, MasterCard, Visa.

RESERVATIONS Recommended.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS Fully accessible.

IF YOU GO The restaurant and the Westin hotel are about two miles east of downtown Morristown and half a mile east of Exit 36 on I-287.