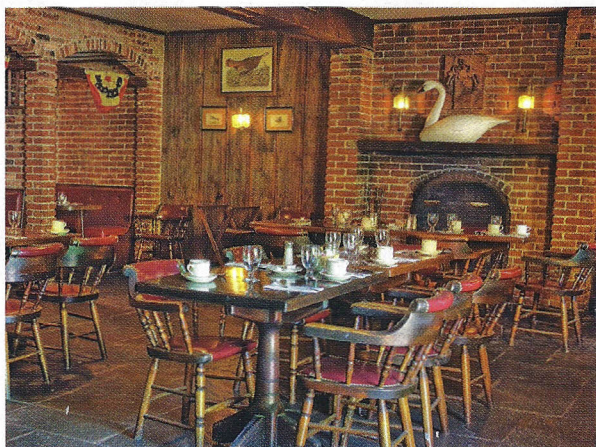


Robert Morris Inn Reopens...

World-renowned chef takes over.

by Beth Schucker



The Brits are back at the Robert Morris Inn," was the rumble through Oxford, Md., on a quiet morning last May when the townspeople learned their beloved inn would reopen after being closed for three years.

They thought about the old days, 300 years ago, when Robert Morris (father of the so-called financier of the American Revolution, Robert Morris Jr.) put Oxford on the Colonial map as chief factor of a Liverpool trading house. Now another Brit, chef Mark Salter, has arrived.

Salter, whose culinary career started in England and bloomed on the Continent, took on celebrity status during his last 17 years as Executive Chef at the Inn at Perry Cabin. Now Salter and his wife, Ailsa, are the new proprietors of the inn and have added fresh touches to the dining areas and guest rooms. But the Salters are concentrating their vision on food. As Mark Salter puts it, for the first time in his career, "Salter is doing Salter."

Salter's Tap Room & Tavern is the casual-dining part of the inn—not to be confused with the more formal dinner-only dining room, which occupies the original early 18th-century public rooms. The tavern and tap room has a warm Colonial feel, complete with a huge fireplace that roars in winter, slate floors, walls of hand-hewn beams and old brick. The recessed booths rouse the image of that deliciously naughty pub scene in the movie *Tom Jones*. Remember? Slurping oysters, licking chicken bones and masticating sweetness from lobster? . . . But there are no such romps today, just genteel dining in the tavern,

tap room, terraces and dining room. The latter offers diners a tad more formality in ambience and food.

Having been drawn into Salter's Tavern several times since its reopening, I can attest to the excellent qualities of several of the starters, like the salad of luscious local tomatoes, scattered with tangy blue cheese and toasted sunflower seeds, all cloaked in a puff of airy greens. And sometimes I crave the silky smooth smoked bluefish pâté. Then again, the mélange of polenta, crab, cauliflower and mascarpone—a rich dip of odd partners—never fails to please my palate. For lunch, you can't miss with a burger on soft, rich brioche.

For tavern dinner entrees, I'm content with the marinated bistro cut of beef, grilled to taste and served with thin green beans and a raft of pecorino fries (an obscenely large raft). But my favorite is the grilled wild rockfish and mashed potatoes bathed in a tomato ragout, nuanced with fennel and chorizo, giving the mild-flavored fish ample room to shine. Both are under \$20. And yes, you will find beef tenderloin on the tavern's dinner menu, served with goat cheese mashed potatoes, port-braised Vidalia onions and grilled asparagus.

It's been said that when James Michener outlined *Chesapeake* in the tavern years ago, he dubbed the Inn's crabcakes "the best." He no doubt would



Larry Martin photos

Above: Corn-crust rockfish with summer vegetables and tapanade; (left) the cozy Tavern.

nod approval of Salter's Tavern crabcake. The bulbous craggy cake, its top seared to a crisp, commands your attention from its perch atop batons of green and yellow squash. The first wallop of crab sweetness is what you expect; the drift to a peppery finish surprises, especially as it plays with the sauce of French tarragon, white wine and butter.

As for dessert, the pavlova delivers serial pleasures—whipped cream melting on your tongue, the chew of meringue, and finally the tartness of berries. I did not love the chocolate carrot cake, however, which lacked moisture.

During our Fourth of July visit, Salter's mind was already racing ahead to hunting season. He described to our table in a tantalizing fashion his fantasy to serve a private game dinner on a pewter platter bearing two whole partridges alongside bread pudding, cranberry sauce and heaps of vegetables. His arms stretched to show the size of the platter. That enthusiasm explains why his young and informed servers often gush about being able to "experience Chef." Salter's passion and talent bode well for the next chapter in the history of the Robert Morris Inn. ↓

The Robert Morris Inn is located at 314 North Morris Street, across from the Oxford-Bellevue Ferry. Breakfast, lunch, dinner and Sunday brunch are served daily in the Tavern year-round (except January). The dining room is open only for dinner daily; reservations required. Tavern entrees \$14–\$26. Dining room entrees \$22–\$29. Sunday brunch \$4–\$18. 410-226-5111; www.robertmorrisonn.com.