



Equinox: Rising from the ashes

By Amanda McDougall - 07/01/10 06:02 PM ET

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It was a long winter for Equinox chef-owner Todd Gray. In December, a grease fire in the kitchen's ventilation system wreaked havoc throughout the kitchen, private dining room and large portions of the main dining room. The damage was extensive, and delays in permits, construction and insurance payments continuously pushed back the restaurant's reopening date, from March to April and then to June.

So it turns out it was a long spring for Gray, too. But after five months of reconstruction and "recalibrating," as Gray puts it, Equinox is up and running again. During the downtime, Gray and his team kept busy (chefs don't like to sit idle) re-imagining the menu and experimenting with ingredients. The culinary tinkering has resulted in a host of fresh flavors and carefully innovative technique. Gray, known for his seasonal, regional modern American cuisine, is showing the next step of his gastronomic evolution — and it's nothing short of delectable. Spices and specialty items from far-off places are finding new homes in his dishes; he's also using the myriad and sapid flavors of fresh herbs to their best advantage.

A handful of signature dishes guide you to sure bets for toothsome vittles; the Equinox "Chopped Salad" is a standout among them. Delicate greens play the part of gracious host to tidbits of rich and gamey Tamworth bacon, tender asparagus pieces and buttery toast with a single quail egg gently cooked into the cut-out middle. The mustard

vinaigrette gives the dish a soft acidity to complement the richness of the oozy yolk and bacon morsels. There's only one problem with the dish: The quail egg hole-in-the-wall is gone too quickly. Truffled macaroni and cheese, served as a side, is another success with its fine-spun truffle headiness, crisped Vermont cheese top and goey interior.

In the starter category, there's nary a dish that disappoints. Veloute of Carolina Sweet Corn is velvety smooth, nectarous and wonderfully adorned with lush lump crabmeat, fresh English peas, pickled onion and a spot of chili oil. Softshell crab, sautéed in butter, is served whole and perched atop a bed of wilted red kale studded with nibbles of that Tamworth bacon, the flavor of which permeates the greens, stem to leaf. Despite its double dose of butter and bacon fat, the dish avoids being weighed down thanks to a lightly sweet and verdant pea coulis and a mellow vinaigrette.

Another dish resides in the gastronomic ether somewhere between salad and gravlax. Red beet-cured Scottish salmon is vivid fuchsia on one side and peachy on the other; its texture is smooth, and the flavors are buttery. The salmon wears a garland of mâche greens and a horseradish cream dressing that's speckled with tiny fried capers that perk up the dish. Although the dill

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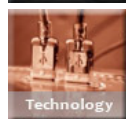
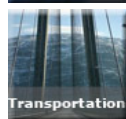
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breadstick is a bit tough, it does its duty as a crunchy textural contrast.

Another meat-centric salad (on the lunch menu) that's good to the last grain is the grilled lamb salad with bulgar wheat. The lamb's savory juices seep into the bed of fluffy cracked wheat, already accented with a perfectly spiced cumin-shallot vinaigrette. The threads of cool cucumber create a temperature and texture contrast that pleases with every forkful.

If you're in the mood for pasta, or just something downright scrumptious, get the gnocchi. Arguably one of the best gnocchi dishes you'll have in the city, the Yukon Gold potato dumplings are fluffy, airy morsels of gustatory pleasure from first to last. Each one is carefully caramelized and then enrobed in an umami-rich trumpet mushroom cream made even more sumptuous by melting dabs of goat's milk-based Boucheron cheese. It's a dish that you'll want to come back for.

In the two new categories for main entrees, "Herb Grilled" and "Pan Roasted," you'll find a Big Eye Carolina Tuna (reincarnated the next week on the lunch menu but instead using arctic char) that flawlessly suits these warm summer nights with its light charring, bright acidity and red onion punch. The most popular item on the menu is the Amish Country veal porterhouse — it's also Chef Gray's favorite dish — which is served with house specialty blue cheese potato tots (available individually in the new "For the table" section), parsnip puree and sherry-shallot jus.

The flatiron steak, sourced from a Piedmont Valley rancher, is grilled to a gentle dark-pink if not specified. The steak is tender and has a gaminess you can't find in mass-produced animals. The accompanying sauce, spiked with green peppercorns, has a juniper-tinged spice to it that leaves a tantalizing prickly sensation.

Another entrée, the Muscovy duck breast, is as succulent and juicy as it should be, but the duck confit tucked underneath the glistening breast meat would have benefited from more time cooking in duck fat to make it melt-in-your-mouth tender.

On the dessert end, a department headed up by Thomas Wellings (previously at Restaurant Eve and Maestro in Virginia), portions are kept forgivingly light. Wellings's innovative dish components are worth a trek into the sugary domain of the dessert menu. In the ice cream sandwich, he slathers an intriguingly flavored lemon balm ice cream between beautifully hued and chewy (some might say overly chewy) pistachio macaroon disks and dots the plate with pods of unctuous pistachio puree topped with clouds of toasted meringue garnished with slightly bitter verbena leaves. The whole effect is satisfyingly sweet with touches of citrus and nuts to round it out.

Similarly, the Jubilee blueberry panna cotta, replete with a heritage-breed blackberry sorbet, is accented with lemon balm and a barely-there cassis froth. Although one night the panna cotta suffered from a tad too much gelatin, the layers of pure berry tastes made the execution error pardonable.

Just a few weeks into its much-anticipated reopening, the air at Equinox is one of contentment and gratitude — to be back at work and serving a full house. (And a star-studded one at that: Former President George H.W. Bush and Barbara Bush were spotted eating there last week.) Regulars will be happy to know that Equinox didn't lose a single staff member due to the renovation — something Gray attributes to "good people and good insurance." Service is friendly and informative, willing to step in when you need a suggestion or more details about a dish, or pull back when you need a moment to savor a bite of the seasonally attuned viands.

Gray and his team are no doubt enjoying their shiny new digs back behind the

black-curtained doorway; with new ovens, ranges, refrigeration, ventilation and air conditioning, there's not much for his talented team to complain about in terms of working conditions. And the forced five-month break during the renovation seemed only to give Gray and his cooks the rest and meditation they needed to come back swinging for summer — quite literally a story of rising from the ashes.