

dining

Virginia's on King: A True Southern Experience

by Margaret White

Bread baskets are a given as a meal precursor at many a restaurant. For good reason, too — warm bread accompanied by creamy butter is almost as comforting of a sight as it is a delicious experience. What is really admirable is when a restaurant can take such a delectable tradition and put its own successful twist on the classic. Virginia's on King brings warm cornbread to the table — warm broccoli cornbread. My dining companion must have said three times, "I love this cornbread; it is so different and so delicious." Satisfying the comfort factor by presenting the warm bread, giving the presentation a Southern flair by having the offering be cornbread, and then adding broccoli to the whole affair and therefore dispelling some of the guilt associated with indulging in carbohydrates (broccoli is, after all, downright healthy). ... Well, this Virginia's place knows how to start off a meal on the right foot.

Upon being seated, (before the arrival of the beloved broccoli bread), featured wines of the evening were immediately proposed: an Argentinean white and a French red to accompany the regular offerings. Pairings for each wine were suggested by Suzie, our competent and friendly server. The wines sounded good, which was fortunate, given that one cannot expect to order a proper cocktail; the close locale to the church on King Street makes a liquor license an impossibility. Evidently, an establishment must be located more than 500 yards from a place of worship to be able to secure a full liquor license. (The Frances Marion Hotel was grandfathered in, for those of you who might be fact checking.) It is so truly Southern to have the church dictate the surroundings, and somehow the beer-and-wine-only offering was rendered downright charming.

Executive Chef Jason Murphy, who developed the menu at Virginia's, quickly prepared two signature appetizers for us to sample: pimiento cheese dip accompanied by multi-seed crackers, and fried okra with garlic aioli. The crackers were a fantastic crisp and peppery complement to the creamy saltiness of the pimiento cheese. And the fried okra is perhaps the South's more than satisfying version of fried calamari. The aioli was slightly spicy, and the okra just melted in your mouth.

The two appetizers, like the remainder of the menu, were inspired by "family recipes and traditional Southern



Executive Chef Jason Murphy



Chicken and Dumplings



Red Velvet Cake



Broccoli Cornbread



Pimiento Cheese Dip with Multi-Seed Crackers

staples," says Nicole De la Cretaz, director of marketing for the Holy City Hospitality Group. "We aim to provide our guests with a true and classic Charleston dining experience." The full bio is on their Web site, www.holy-cityhospitality.com, but the inspiration for the restaurant came from the Bennett family, true Charlestonians, lead by their matriarch, Virginia. The Bennett family tradition of gathering together for weekly family meals stimulated the Virginia's concept.

As a chef, Murphy joined Holy City Hospitality Group in 2002 at Rue De Jean before moving on to become executive chef at Coast Bar and Grille (the three restaurants are all products of the group, in addition to Good Food Catering). Murphy now operates as executive chef overseeing all three of the dining establishments. Affordable and personable, he tells us happily that the summer has been "busier than expected." Asked why he selected the two appetizers (we had also been eyeing the Salmon Croquettes and the Pan-Seared Scallops over Pimiento Cheese Grits), he notes that they are representative of his cuisine and also very popular. "The she-crab soup is also a great seller, but given the heat today, I stayed away from that offering," he says. Good thing, actually; with the weather being a stifling 90-odd degrees, soup, no matter how delicious, would have inevitably been met with some trepidation.

Post appetizers, we dug into some lovely salads. The wedge salad is beautifully presented in a boat-style dish; the generous chunk of iceberg is drizzled with creamy dressing and topped with a smattering of bacon and diced tomatoes. The mesclun greens are delicately dressed with a lemony vinaigrette and topped with cucumbers and grape tomatoes — a perfect summer salad. And, if you are watching your diet, the salad can be prepared as an entrée and topped with chicken or seafood.

However, if you are watching your diet, I am not sure Virginia's is your place. This is Southern food at its creamy, crispy, carby, calorie-laden best. True that the shrimp and grits were topped with strings of green and yellow peppers and sweet onion, yet the vegetable portion was hardly the showcase. The meal was generous with the succulent shrimp, and huge chunks of chorizo gave the creamy sauce a spicy flavor, and the grits just soaked up the sauce wonderfully. My dining companion, who opted for the chicken and dumplings, may have had a slightly less rich meal, and the broth had a lovely saffron flavor. But make no mistake that this is a place to indulge.

On that note, we ended the meal with a slice of red velvet cake. (Although the fudge plate sounded pretty good too!) Virginia's truly oozes all that is great about the South — charm, hospitality and rich, delicious food.

Virginia's on King is located at 412 King St. in Historic Downtown Charleston. Call 843-735-5800 for information.