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FOOD | FOOD FEATURE 06.29.05

Let The Invasion Begin

At last, Café Dufrain gives diners a reason to visit Harbour Island

BY BRIAN RIES

Traditionally, there has not been much incentive to venture over the bridge and onto Harbour Island, that enclave of pricey condos and exclusive estates. Unless you live there, I guess. Even then, the lack of retail and restaurant development has turned the island into a high-priced place to sleep. For fun and excitement, the natives had to flee the island.

Café Dufrain gives them a reason to stay home. And gives the rest of us a reason to invade.

The restaurant began as an Internet café and coffee shop - just light lunches and take-out for the locals. About eight months ago, husband-and-wife owners Andy and Ferrell Bonnemort took a big leap and upgraded to fancier fare, banking on talented young chef Christopher Cresanta to create food worthy of a special trip H.I. He didn't disappoint.

The view - especially from the small, covered outdoor patio - is incredible. It's a straight look across the wide channel to the glass and metal back (the pretty side) of the St. Pete Times Forum and an expanse of downtown Tampa. At sunset, the lights glint off the buildings and the gently rolling water. It feels like Florida.

You can watch the working folk walk their wee dogs - the kind engineered to live in tiny condos - across the cobbled waterside courtyard. Café Dufrain is pretty casual, so some of those dogs might even accompany their owners for dinner on the patio. That comes with the neighborhood vibe the Bonnemorts have been trying to cultivate.

If a pedigree counts in the food business, Andy Bonnemort has it covered. His dad owns a long-standing restaurant in Paris and his mother was a confidant of legendary food icon James Beard. She currently works with the Beard Foundation.

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ON THE LIST: The filet mignon qualifies as one of the best steaks of 2005.

(credit: VALERIE TROYANO)

Café Dufrain  1/2
707 Harbour Post Drive, Tampa,
813-275 -9701.
www.cafedufrain.com. 11 a.m.-10
p.m. Mon.-Sat.

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Chef Cresanta's menu defies any thematic pigeonholes. He digs into Indian, Thai and Caribbean pantries to produce a menu that is all over the world map. If there is a unifying character to the food, it is Cresanta's confident use of strong flavors and potent spices. He isn't willy nilly about it, though, and displays boldness or restraint as required by the ingredients. He is fond of hidden pockets of spicy heat, enough to punctuate the food and wake up the palate, but not enough to overwhelm. It can be exciting.

The calabaza bisque (\$3), perfumed with cardamom and coriander, dotted with blistering habanero oil and garnished with slivers of fried ginger, was a great example. The Indian spices gave the soup a flavor foundation; spicy oil and ginger made occasional assaults on my taste-buds; a tart and sweet star-fruit chutney provided some contrast; and fatty, unctuous coconut milk smoothed over all the rough edges. Somewhere in there, the calabaza - a pumpkin popular in the Caribbean - got lost, but I didn't miss it. The squash was merely a vehicle for some expertly woven spices.

A steak is often best when simply adorned, but Chef Cresanta made me happy he meddled a bit with the filet mignon (\$23). A three-inch square of beef with a dark seared crust was coated with house-made chili powder, perfectly seasoning the meat, with an occasional blast of dried pepper heat. A pocket of gooey goat cheese in the center gave this notoriously bland cut of meat a buttery flavor to go along with its legendary buttery texture. Creamy risotto was dotted with large kernels of sweet corn, and simply roasted oyster mushrooms were scattered around the plate. It was the best filet I have had in quite some time and makes my list of top steaks of 2005.

There were a few stumbles along the way. Café Dufrain's blackened mahi (\$15) had an excellent crisp crust that was heavily seasoned with simple curry powder, but the flesh paid for it by being overcooked. It sat on couscous that was exceptionally dry, which may have made the occasional intrusion of chopped mint seem more bitter than it normally would.

Conch salad (\$15) was another disappointment. A thin filet of fried conch was coated in a crust laden with luscious brazil nuts that had a tendency to separate from the shellfish in large sections. Stemmy watercress, triangles of papaya and sections of pineapple were dressed with sweet (but not too sweet) mango vinaigrette. The pineapple was succulent, but the papaya was visibly under-ripe - hard and flavorless.

Four large triangles of shrimp toast (\$9) were a little boring. Essentially garlic- and ginger-flavored shrimp fritters, the frying seemed to mute Chef Cresanta's spice palette. A very sweet glaze didn't add much, but a few puddles of bright red chili sauce scattered around the plate provided a bit of excitement.

Not everything pushes the spice envelope at Café Dufrain. Black bean soup (\$3) was sparsely seasoned, creamy and tender; the barest hint of smoky cumin infused the bowl of beans and a tiny dollop of lime- and cilantro-infused cream adorned the top. It was the essence of the black bean.

Unfussy baked chicken rigatoni (\$13) was pure comfort food. The pasta is the star of the dish - as it should be - with large cylinders of toothsome pasta sauced with a subtle combination of cheeses, mushrooms and sun-dried tomatoes. Chunks of roasted chicken and discs of Italian sausage gave the simple dish some protein heft.

above typical bar fare

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Café Dufrain's wine list is small, well chosen, inexpensive, and filled with bottles you probably haven't tried before. It can be hard to find the perfect bottle for the wildly varied flavors packed into Café Dufrain's food, but you'll have fun trying. I suggest the 9th Island Pinot Noir (\$25), filled with dark fruit and earth, all the way from Tasmania.

After we polished off the bottle of Tasmanian delight, a simple disc of creamy, subdued lemon cheesecake (\$5) was a fine accompaniment for our coffee. Apples - undercooked - were piled in the center of a square of crisp puff pastry, a drizzle of caramelized sugar accenting the tart (\$6).

Café Dufrain has all the qualities of a "hidden gem." Few people know about it. The prices are surprisingly low. The place is off - but not too far from - the beaten path. And the food is damn good. As soon as word gets out, Harbour Island will have to prepare for invasion.

Brian Ries is a former restaurant general manager with an advanced diploma from the Court of Master Sommeliers. He can be reached at brian.ries@weeklyplanet.com. Planet food critics dine anonymously, and the paper pays for the meals. Restaurants chosen for review are not related to advertising.

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