



## A TRIUMPH OF BRAINS OVER PRAWNS

Chef Jonathan Rapp isn't formally trained. He's just a genius.

BY TOM SOBOLESKI | PHOTOGRAPHY BY TOM HOPKINS

**T**he airy design of the River Tavern in Chester belies the complexity of flavors one encounters there. Though owner Jonathan Rapp insists, "My food is simple and straightforward," the multiple layers of his dishes seem to satiate deep, uncharted cravings.

Decidedly minimalist, the entire venue ensures your attention stays focused on the food. With a European feel, contrasting blond and dark horizontal panels line a row of plain wood tables, providing welcoming warmth opposite the small bistro-style bar in the front room. Behind partition walls sprinkled with Sol LeWitt prints, a more formal dining space overlooks the Pataconk Brook in the rear. A small vase of colorful flowers sits on each white tablecloth.

The menu at River Tavern might be termed "fluid"—it's never the same one day to the next. That's partially because Rapp's commitment is to use local ingredients as much as possible, the variety of which changes within and throughout seasons. But having a standard menu would also conflict with Rapp's core philosophy. "I don't like to cook from recipes," he says. "It's all off the top of my head. Every day is seasonal to that day."

It's a combination of the impulsive, the meticulousness, and the evocative, he explains. A feeling that may be conjured by something Rapp tasted or smelled or read leads him to constantly experiment and create anew. "I never make the same dish the same way twice. It's the art of combining things," he says. "You have to let the ingredients shine." And those ingredients can vary the next time he makes a similar dish. He believes you have to let the flavor of the food itself develop, and not be disguised. "My food is four to five ingredients tops."

On a recent visit, our party of four agreed to share plates. This proved to be a fun identity challenge; as soon as you began to savor and dissect one flavor, another quickly emerged to stimulate the palate.

A generous portion of stewed shrimp in a smoky, earthy sauce of cured pork soffrito, spiced pine nuts, and fried shallots was one starter. Soffrito is a mix of cured pork fat, or salt pork, sautéed in olive oil with onion, celery, garlic, and herbs. This creates a base of seemingly endless flavors that wow the taste buds with each bite. The large bowlful, filled with local heirloom white and green beans, would be a satisfying meal by itself with a glass or two of wine.

A second appetizer of yellowfin tuna crudo featured thin slices of lightly grilled tuna, about one inch square, on a bed of charred tomatoes and sliced radishes dressed with miso mayo and a pep-

pery togarashi. This was sprinkled with shiso leaves, adding a flavor that you can't quite place (citrus or mint?) while providing a nice offset to the spicy togarashi.

Our four entrees captured the diversity and nuance Rapp strives for. Perfectly seared tuna sat atop a salad of potatoes, cherry tomatoes, and pole beans dressed with olive aioli and basil. Toasty pancetta in the aioli provides a delicate salty coating for the salad and a luscious dip for the tuna.

A steaming bowl of ramen, chock full of chunks of smoked chicken and pork in a spicy sesame broth, drew raves as the quintessential comfort food. Mixed with pickled shiitake mushrooms, slivers of fried chicken, and topped with morsels of braised tofu and slices of soy-marinated eggs, it was a sight to salivate over.

The Poussin was a well-composed dish marvelously pan roasted to a golden brown and nestled in a black pepper honey sauce. A crusty cheddar bread pudding, redolent with heirloom tomato and onion, was the perfect accompaniment. The sauce was the perfect bridge, marrying the richness of the bird with the pudding.

Halibut's normally mild flavor was enlivened by pan roasting in brown butter with tomatoes and scallions. Chickpeas sautéed with garlic and kale were added to the pan sauce, providing a spicy bedding for the fish.

A velvety pinot noir with balanced tones of cherry, currants, and spices proved a perfect accompaniment for both the appetizers and entrees.

By consensus, the star of our exploration was the first course of stewed shrimp, whose savoriness seemed to linger. But the satisfying depth found in every offering was representative of Rapp's approach. "Food should be comforting and familiar, not challenging," he says.

Rapp is a working model for the power of innate talent over education. He has no formal training or classwork in cooking. He holds a degree in art history from the University of Chicago. Cooking is something he learned at home and developed from an early age. Raised in Essex, Rapp says, "Both my parents were very good cooks," and took him under their wings, encouraging and nurturing his interest. "By 12 or 13, I was making the family dinner every night."

After graduating college, his passion for cooking was too strong to be just a hobby. Itching to try running his own restaurant, but without resources, his father left his architectural career to help

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RT Ramen

his son get started. Their goal, Rapp says, “was to try to recreate the kind of food we cooked at home.”

After six months of looking everywhere from Stonington to Greenwich for a space, they decided, “Why not just go to New York City?” Together they opened Etats-Unis in New York City in 1992. A decade later, Rapp struck out on his own and opened River Tavern.

It was more than just a change of scenery. For one thing, the customer base is less diverse, Rapp says. “In Chester, you can’t be as uncompromising as in a place like New York. It requires softening some things a bit.” He praises his staff for focusing attention on every single customer and upholding high culinary standards.

“You need everybody,” he says. “With my staff, it’s a collaborative creation. In a creative exercise, you can’t be creative by yourself. You have to rely on other people to create your vision. I’m very proud of my staff. Many have been with me since the beginning and we’ve grown up together. I have every confidence to let them be creative.”

Diligence is his trademark. “We do the best we can with every plate.” On the other hand, he explains the never-ending challenge of pleasing every patron. “Food is so intensely subjective. What you love someone else may hate. On an individual level, you can’t worry about what others think. You can’t be perfect,” he says. “The food has to appeal to too many. If it does, that’s an achievement.”

Two dessert offerings proved that meticulous preparation extends to every detail at River Tavern. A chocolate soufflé, standing tall and proud in its ramekin, was velvety and sinfully delicious. Wood-roasted peaches rested in a pool of lemon ricotta with hazelnuts and tarragon leaves, adding a floral note that was light, tasteful, and deeply satisfying.

Judging by its esteemed reputation and wide acclaim, River Tavern is achieving as close to culinary perfection as you’re likely to find anywhere. ●

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