

The Accidental Chef: Taking a bite of Jefferson's culinary vision

Kendra Bailey Morris THE ACCIDENTAL CHEF

Published: February 28, 2010

A few weeks ago, the hubby and I decided we would pay a visit to Keswick Hall, a 600-acre estate in Virginia's hunt country not far from Charlottesville.

While our visit was certain to include plenty of snuggling by the fire (and there are several gorgeous, oversized fireplaces roaring and ready throughout the resort), what we were really there to do was sample some of Chef Craig Hartman's Jefferson-inspired cuisine.

Fossett's restaurant, the culinary shining star of the resort, is named after Thomas Jefferson's chief cook, Edith Fossett, who held one of the most responsible positions during Jefferson's retirement years. After becoming well-versed in the art of French cooking, Fossett created locally inspired dishes for the many prominent guests who dined at Monticello. From wine, food and entertaining to agricultural research and exploration, Fossett held down Jefferson's culinary fort like a true pro.

Today, Hartman continues Fossett's legacy with a menu that not only reflects local and seasonal ingredients, but also incorporates a level of elegance expected at a hotel recognized by Conde Nast Traveler as one of the world's best.

Hartman was kind enough to share one of his recipes so you can create your own Keswick dining experience at home. Hushpuppy Crusted Blue Ridge Mountain Rainbow Trout bathed in a ragout of shrimp, bacon and leeks is one of his more user-friendly recipes that is perfect for the home cook.

Featuring filets of skin-on mountain trout, Hartman's fish is lightly breaded in a cornmeal and buttermilk crust and then pan-fried in olive oil before resting atop a ragout of leeks, bacon and shrimp accented with rich crème fraiche (a soured crème with a high amount of butterfat). If you can't get trout filets, you can substitute a similar white, flaky fish such as cod, halibut or rockfish, and I hate to say it, but yes, you can leave the skin off, although as Mom would say, that's where all the nutrients are.

I personally recommend frying the fish in a cast-iron pan as its high heat will help create a super-crunchy crust. However, be careful not to heat the pan too high since the recipe calls for frying in olive oil, which tends to burn and smoke at very high temperatures.

Kendra Bailey Morris is a Richmond-based food writer, culinary instructor and author of "White Trash Gatherings: From-Scratch Cooking for Down-Home Entertaining" (Ten Speed Press). Send ideas, tips or culinary questions to info@theaccidentalchef.net or visit <http://www.theaccidentalchef.net>.