

Dining Out

Corinna Lothar

Tallula serving inventive dishes in classic style

Casual fare with a dash of fun

Tallula is “running water” in an Indian language — perhaps the Cherokee native to North Carolina. Water ripples over blue tiles of a fountain in the center of the restaurant Tallula in Arlington. Chicken or egg? Is the fountain there because of the word, or does the word follow the fountain?

Decide for yourself. Tallula is fun and a place to expect a well-prepared casual dinner.

Despite the funky appearance of the Washington Boulevard restaurant — dappled burnt-siena walls, the blue-tiled fountain, waiters in charreuse shirts — this is a serious kitchen, producing excellent classic American fare that can rival just about any K Street kitchen.

The wine list is extraordinary: more than 270 bottles, all of which can be purchased in the wine shop next door, and about 70 different wines by the glass.

The full menu is available in an adjacent lounge, and tables on the sidewalk are set off from passersby by large pots of flowering red petunias.

Every other Tuesday, chef Nathan Anda prepares an ambitious tasting menu for \$70, including wines — the next one is next Tuesday, featuring Virginia wines. We tried the main course of one of his Tuesday menus and were impressed: slowly roasted, shredded beef brisket, served with a rich, dark wine sauce, was accompanied by a lovely, grainy corn cake and an adventurous idea of fresh watermelon balls sprinkled with green onions (it works).

The remaining dishes on that Tuesday’s wine dinner, with wines to match, were an appetizer of grilled sausages, a wild mushroom and grilled fig salad and a dessert combining pastry, sorbet, blueberries and peaches. Reservations are accepted for the wine dinners; the menu is posted at www.tallularestaurant.com.

The open kitchen at the back of the restaurant is separated from the diners by a counter, inlaid with bits of colored glass, with seating for six. It’s fun to sit there and watch the comings and goings of the cooks and the waiters.

Mr. Anda is very much in evidence, checking each plate as it goes out, sprinkling a bit of this or a dash of that, or rearranging the appearance of the plate. He takes time to joke with his staff or to chat with his customers, but he keeps an eye out to make sure that everything that leaves his kitchen looks as good as it will taste.

One of Mr. Anda’s most innovative ideas, and one perfectly suited to the casual neighborhood style of Tallula, is his “amuse yourself” menu, a selection of about a dozen small bites that can be ordered as an appetizer, combined for shared nibbles with drinks, or ordered in sequence to make an entire meal. They’re priced from \$2.25 to \$3 and consist of mini morsels.

A baby burger is enhanced with a soupcon of truffle butter; duck mezzaluna is a wonderfully crunchy tacolike shell filled with shredded savory roasted duck leg; a corn beignet is a lush corn custard; a chicken crepe is a mini crepe stuffed with bits of chicken and onion marmalade.

Appetizers, like all of Mr. Anda’s dishes, are substantial and can be shared. The Vidalia onion soup is a rich, creamy bisque, unlike a traditional French onion soup. There’s a little creme fraiche in the soup and a sprinkling of crispy fried onions on top. Subtle and delicious.

Tuna tartare is mixed with small chunks of avocado and served with a spiced pineapple puree, adding a pleasant semi-sweet flavor to the dish. A simple lettuce salad is enhanced with goat cheese and cashews in a fine sherry vinaigrette.

Other first courses include fried oysters, seared foie gras



Braised short ribs come with creamy cheddar grits and green tomato salsa. Below, a large skylight dominates the center of the dining room at Tallula.

Photographs by Bert V. Goulaït/The Washington Times



with red cabbage, a crabcake served with napa cabbage slaw, and mussels.

Among the main courses, the walnut-crusted rack of lamb stands out. The serving of three double chops is enough to sate the hungriest appetite. The lamb is tender and delicate, cooked exactly as ordered, served with an excellent thinly layered cheese and potato gratin and a compote of Vidalia onions and roasted garlic.

The pork chop is another winner. It has all the juiciness and tenderness of brined pork, yet retains its flavor. Served with an unusual little onion and apple tart and braised red cabbage, the pork is a wonderful all-season dish. The diver scallops are equally first rate, served with bacon and asparagus. They’re plump and cooked just long enough to stay moist and tender.

The menu includes ricotta gnocchi with a mushroom, truffle and corn sauce; noodles with green peas, pancetta and sundried tomatoes; wild

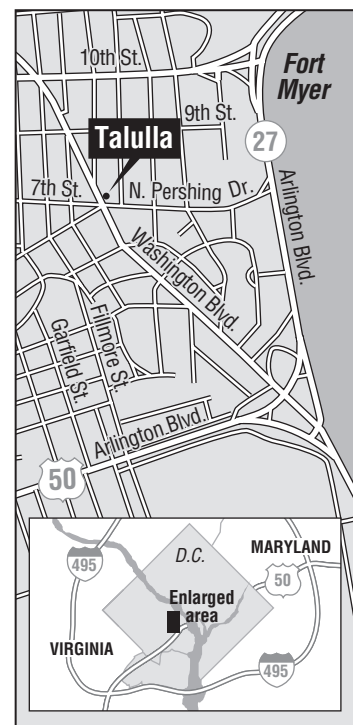
Alaskan halibut and wild Pacific king salmon; roast chicken; and a New York strip steak.

It’s hard to resist the kitchen’s desserts, despite the size of the main courses. We tried an unusual and very good version of a cappuccino creme brulee, served in a coffee mug, with the crisp brown sugar beneath the custard.

On another visit, Jodie, our solicitous and charming young waitress, recommended the dessert of the day, a strawberry shortcake. She returned to make sure we liked it as much, she said, as she did. It was terrific: fresh biscuits topped with a mascarpone cream, with sliced strawberries and a generous dollop of whipped cream.

Tallula has just introduced its new brunch menu, served Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Brunch includes such off-beat dishes as a fried egg BLT, a breakfast burrito stuffed with duck confit, no-bean chili, corn dogs and fried green tomatoes as well as more traditional

WHEN YOU GO



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RESTAURANT: Tallula, 2761 Washington Blvd., Arlington. 703/778-5051 (reservations accepted only for groups of seven or more and the Tuesday wine dinners)

HOURS: Dinner 5:30 to 10 p.m. Sunday to Thursday and until 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday; brunch 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Friday to Sunday

PRICES: Starters, \$6 to \$13; entrees, \$15 to \$28; desserts, \$7

CREDIT CARDS: All major cards

PARKING: A lot to the left of the building, with street parking

ACCESS: Wheelchair accessible

brunch dishes. The young staff is friendly, competent and knowledgeable. With Mr. Anda’s carefully prepared dishes, they make Tallula an experience to savor.