

DINING REVIEW | CRAIG LABAN

Verge

From its location to its cuisine, a new East Falls restaurant has gambled — and should win fans.

It's probably a sin to go to lunch at a restaurant that serves courses on East Falls. But one can hardly fault chef Shawn Dolan for trying.

Judiciously marks virtually every aspect of Verge, the intriguing new restaurant Dolan has created with developer Mark Sherman and partner Jay Galzer, a Restaurant Renaissance fixture who founded the Restaurant School.

The location, for example, isn't exactly a natural hot spot. The former office building is a homely yellow brick box dressed up with wavy, patina rusted iron accents and colorful awnings. There is, of course, that terrace with an expansive river view. But this is fancy paradise also sits in the concrete shadow of the massive Route 1 overpass that spans the Schuylkill. Trussel meals here are often punctuated by the funny number of traffic eating the Roosevelt Expressway.

So why not attempt something edgy like the place, say, octopus with black thickskin, or heirloom tomatoes olive oil gelato? It sounds like a foolish gambit in a neighborhood that, despite ample promise, has yet to sustain a decent bistro, let alone a more ambitious restaurant. But Verge, despite its early flaws, has the makings of East Falls' first real dining success.

This is in large part thanks to Dolan, the 31-year-old Scranton native who last worked as executive chef at Le Mas Brezier. Dolan, who abandoned a brief career as a cop for the kitchen, trained at the Culinary Institute of America, then did time at New York's River Café, the Inn at Little Washington, the Ritz Carlton Philadelphia, and Brasserie Penne.

Along the way, he evolved a management philosophy that suits Verge well as it tries to be a sleeker classic — sophisticated without stuffiness, and a well-informed staff that seems genuinely caring and enthusiastic. When the kitchen is on the mark, Verge's artfully presented contemporary fare offers all the convincing necessary.

A polenta appetizer brings irresistibly crisp slices of warm corn cakes pierced by a rich-tasting piece of fennel-scented sausage. A delicate buckwheat crepe is filled into a four-corner parcel around an indulgent filling of creamy goat cheese, smoky Westphalian ham, and fresh sweet fips. The grilled octopus was as tender as any in town, and its garnish was equally appealing, a rich saffron-colored soup broth filled with cockle clams, coquille leaven, and black garbanzo beans that added a starry snap.

Dolan has a way of occasionally fastening too much with his food, adding perhaps one too many clever twists. A lovely duck breast that shows with spicy pineapple glaze was a delight until it bit into something soft and crumbly beneath the ginger (in these were homemade coconut-milk "ricc crispies"). An appetizer of beets brought the root transformed into numerous variations and colors — sliced like crimson cards and minced into golden beet tartar — but the beets themselves had a dull sweetness that was overshadowed by a memorable Haytag blue cheese.

Some interesting dishes could have been better cooked. The totis "scallop" with charred corn succotash would have been an eye-opening vegetarian success had the totis discs not been scorched black and bitter. The second leg of lamb could have been tender.

But many of Verge's imperfect dishes had too many virtues to ignore. I might have preferred the stopper-size gnocci a little smaller, but they were impressively light in a heavy tomato sauce speckled with olives of many green origins. The oval risotto had an unassuming gray hue (that is, crown of edible flowers and homemade potato chips), but the flavor, combined with streaks of dark chocolate vinaigrette, was mouthfully rich. More lobster would have benefited the complexion, but they were delicious nonetheless, long ricotta-filled tubes of tender lobster-scented pasta gratified beneath a sweet garlic sauce.



Chef Shawn Dolan with a polenta appetizer that has lentil-scented sausage.



PHOTO: JEFFREY M. HARRIS FOR THE INQUIRER
Verge, located in a former office building, has a terrace with a view of the Schuylkill — not of a couple of overpasses that cross it.

Several dishes needed no improvement. The superbly tender spiced-rubbed rib eye (the most expensive entrée at a reasonable \$22.50) came with fabulous fried red onion strips, bacon-brusted escabeche, and an intensely good homemade Worcestershire sauce that reminded me vaguely of teriyaki. The East Falls file (for tonight a medley of perfectly cooked seafood — sweet prawns, seared ruby tuna, and salmon — over a tangle of penicilli noodles haberd in a Thai-style peanut curry).

Dolan also did a fine job presenting some less common fish for more than just novel effect. Australian barramundi — a giant perch with firm white flesh — came grilled to a toothsome brown crisp over an emerald mound of coconut curried lentils. The seared fillets of wild-caught pike, stacked like cards over a sweet-and-sour peach sauce, hush puppies, and braised mustard greens, gave me a pleasant flashback to childhood summers in the Great Lakes.

The wine selection will be familiar to anyone who shops at Moore Bros. In Pennsylvania, whose wines are inspired by Verge's exclusive wholesaler. The list is filled with good values from small European producers, with plenty under \$40, but skips shy of anything particularly special. Dolan says simply that few customers have yet to show much interest in pricier wines.

I wonder how many are ready to eat tomatoes for dessert? Veterans pastry chef Luis Cortes (ex Ciboulette, Brasserie Penne) has crafted several more traditional desserts. From a buttery plum tart to chocolate bignones and a chocolate-banana napoleon (my personal favorite) he heard from his days at Susanna Pao.

But the coffee of tomatoes and olives is hard to recommend. Each is presented in simple syrup until it reaches that fragile threshold where the savory turns to sweet — the tomato like some exotic zucchini, the dark olive a fishy little plum — not as ripe as it might sound. Faced with a scoop of vivacious basil sorbet, this is what Dolan returns to as "a real Verge dessert."

Like the restaurant itself, it's a daring gamble with nice odds.

Next Sunday, Craig Laban reviews Washington Square.

Contact restaurant critic Craig Laban at 215-654-8882 or claban@phillynews.com. Read his recent work at <http://go.philly.com/craiglaban>.



East Falls Hot Pot has prawns, tuna and salmon over penicilli noodles with Thai-style peanut curry.

VERY GOOD

VERGE
4101 Kelly Dr., 215-689-8000
Outgunning East Falls finally has a winner with this ambitious new restaurant, a converted office building with a terrace view of Kelly Drive (and the Route 1 overpass), a friendly staff and a talented young chef who isn't afraid to experiment. The cutting-edge fare doesn't always work, but this still feels like a kitchen on the rise.

MENU HIGHLIGHTS Polenta "porchetta," grilled octopus in shellfish ragout, buckwheat crepe with fips and ham, East Falls Hot Pot, waffleyed pike, barramundi appetizer, rice-rubbed rib eye, chocolate-banana napoleon, tomato and olive crostini.

WINE LIST The cellar has a small but smart selection of quality table wines mostly from Europe at very reasonable markups. Try the Barons of Aoli from Ferrara (€20), the Forts pinot noir (\$41), or a crisp white Macon from Burgundy at \$33.

WEEKEND NOISE The echoey dining room is fairly noisy, at 88 decibels, but it's on the outside terrace, where steady traffic riffs low 80s. (Scale is 70 decibels or less.)

IF YOU GO Dinner Monday through Thursday 5 to 10 p.m., Friday and Saturday 5 to 10:30 p.m., Sunday 5 to 9 p.m., Sunday brunch 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., Entrees \$17-\$22.50.

■ Reservations accepted.
■ All major cards accepted.
■ Wheelchair accessible, as long as it doesn't bother other patrons.
■ Wheelchair accessible.
■ Free parking lot.

OR TRY THESE

Here are two other new suggested eateries or near East Falls:

TOMMY GUNNS
4901 Ridge Ave., 215-508-1030.
All old gas stations should be converted into cheery yellow barbecue pits like this one, which sits just outside the Main Street entrance to Manayunk. The smoked meats here are decent, especially the pulled pork, but sides still need work.
Visited September 2004.

THE BAKERY AT THE MILLS
The Mills at East Falls, 3510 Scott Lane, 215-754-1111. This intriguing bakery/cafe anchors the recently rehabbed Dobson Mills complex. It's hard to find but worth a visit, especially for the crusty loaves of bread, which are less beautiful but more consistent than the pastries.
Visited September 2004.

The Bell Key

Superior: Rare; sets fine-dining

Excellent: Excels in every category of the dining experience.

Very Good: Outstanding, with above-average food.

OK or miss.

No bells: Poor.

Craig Laban's reviews can be accessed through The Inquirer's archive at <http://www.philly.com>.

DRINK

Sicilian gold

As memories of Shore days fade like autumn leaves, wish you could recapture summer in a bottle? Try this sun-kissed wine from cutting-edge Casamano winery.

Made from insolia, a white Sicilian grape, this rich wine features nutcracker and herbs bursting with the refreshing energy of lively citrus fruit. Enjoy it with pasta, smothered chicken or sea scallops.

Casamano Insolia, 2004, \$8.99 at Canal's Discount Liquor Mart, 2340 Route 28, Pennsauken; \$10.99 at Kress Wine, 1 Berlin St., Cherry Hill, and \$11.29 by special order (see bottle next issue) at Pennsylvania State Stores.

—Michael McCoolley, head sommelier, Dorsino's



Ritner Street

continued from M1

few blocks west, between 10th and 17th Streets, where the windows of the brick rowhouses peer out beneath heavy, arched brownstone lintels.

This is the parish of loquacious, grape-tinted St. Monica's Church, and it is a close and old and textured neighborhood.

Across from the church, at Canal and Saunageen (1840 Ritner, 215-468-7977), a sign in the window urges youngsters to consider the neighborhood or preschool. There are double-parking protocols: Park only on the south side of the street, and keep your flashers on. At popular Detro's Bakery (1649 Ritner, 215-334-2999), a poster solicits donations for a benevolent transplant for Carmen Patis, the aging owner.

Patis's is a dessert bakery. The bread baker's block came in Cacia's (1326 Ritner, 215-334-1240), where you will find young Sten Cacia sliding a 20-foot-long paddle into the brick oven, baking my favorite chewy Italian rolls in the morning and later extracting trays of the tomato pies they sell by the square.

Each Sunday during football season, Sam is roasting pork in the bread ovens, hand-carving it to order — so it retains the proper crisp up — for \$4.25 pork sandwiches. The landmark of the block, though, is John's

Market, which since 1923 has morphed into Dad's Stuffings, the pride of court by Carmen Comencoro, 75, and his sons in the attic (even now that his sons run the business), accepting check-kisses from his adoring female public.

Dad's Stuffings

1618 Ritner St., 215-334-1934
312 S. Blochmore Pike, 866-228-7744

He has assembled something of a deus-ex-machina duo, adding all manner of stuffed-wild-chops and pork to the bread chicken legs he began stuffing 30 years ago.

The old butcher shop most hooks are still there. But now stoves and walk-in coolers substitute the old family kitchen while I'm there, and soups and eggplant parmesans, and stuffed meat loaves shrouded in bacon, and trays of baked ziti and the chicken meatballs that Carmen perfected during a storm, and a lean and beefy Black Angus cheesesteak.

Carmen's wife, Annette, escorts me up the steep wooden stairs to where she hand-forms the astonishingly good, almost fluffy jumbo-lobster crabcakes — Mom's Crab Cakes — brushing their coats of Japanese bread crumbs with egg wash to make them crisp up and brown.

I detect a subtle flavor I can't put my finger



WILLIAM J. FITZPATRICK/PHOTO FOR THE INQUIRER
Dad's Stuffings is the pride of Carmen Comencoro and wife Annette. Her handmade crabcakes, specked with a secret ingredient, are among the specialties.

on, a secret ingredient that Annette says only she uses — that no competitor can match.

My guess? It's a pinch of Ritner Street.

Contact columnist Rick Nichols at 215-655-8715 or rnicko@phillynews.com. Read his recent work at <http://go.philly.com/nichols>.