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Seeing Red at Flemington Grill

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By Janet Leonardi (Correspondent)

Matt McPherson has a special fondness for the color red.

"I grew up in Flemington and my grandfather had a farm in town that I loved visiting," McPherson says. He always remembered the farm's red tractors, red barns, red trucks and, of course, its roosters. Today McPherson, still a Flemington resident, is the chef/proprietor of the aptly named restaurant, Matt's Red Rooster Grill.

"I spent a lot of time during my youth in kitchens because my family's focus was food," McPherson recalls. "My dad enjoyed cooking and my grandparents, in addition to their local farm, also had a place in North Carolina. I'd go there every summer and we'd all cook. I especially remember the pig roasts."

Unlike many young people who search to find their career niche, McPherson always knew he wanted to become a chef. "I started a catering business at 16, and because I was still too young to drive, my dad had to drive me to the grocery store to buy the food and to the events where I cooked it," he says.

McPherson enrolled in the Polytech Culinary Arts program at Hunterdon Central High School when he was a junior, and by September of his senior year, McPherson already had been accepted at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y.

Then there was no looking back. After graduating from CIA, where he earned a Bachelor of Science degree in restaurant management, he accepted a job with Restaurant Associates in New York. "I worked on the team that opened The Sea Grill at Rockefeller Center," McPherson says. He later added stints at the Florida Keys resort, Little Palm Island and became spa chef at the luxurious Enchantment Resort in Sedona, Ariz. "Out west I reinvented everything I cooked to have more flavor but less fat," he says. "I worked a lot with vinegars because they're very flavorful yet low in calories. The entire experience challenged me, opening my eyes to a whole new spectrum of food."

But as enlightening as the experience was, McPherson knew he wanted to return to New Jersey to begin his next venture and quotes his grandfather saying, "you can take the boy out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the boy."

Luckily for Flemington, McPherson came home to his country roots and in 2004 opened Matt's Red Rooster on Bloomfield Avenue in the heart of town. The restaurant is housed in a quaint turn-of-the-century Victorian building located right next door to his father's insurance agency. "I actually used to play in the yard of this place," he remembers.

McPherson restored the building to reflect the simplicity and casual elegance of his cuisine. A welcoming porch has tables for outdoor dining in good weather and soft earth-tone walls and a main-level open kitchen give the restaurant its warm, convivial ambiance.

Several rooster statues keep watch over the dining area, and a front window pane is adorned with a stained-glass rooster — in red, of course. The upstairs floor houses an additional dining room — a separate private dining space for parties up to 12 — and its walls are hung with paintings of appropriately rural landscapes created by a local artist.

The restaurant's focal point is the large, wood-burning grill McPherson fires up with aged fruit wood every night, and he says it's well worth the effort.

McPherson's cuisine is all about freshness and quality. "I add flavor without taking away from the natural goodness of product," he says. "You won't find dishes here smothered in sauces."

What you will find is fresh, locally grown produce and menu selections that can include Ahi Tuna with spicy soy mustard sauce, Macadamia Crusted Tilapia, Orange honey brined Griggstown chicken breast, Colorado rack of lamb and the Rooster's 30-day dry-aged steak of the night.

Soups, appetizers and salads change seasonally, but McPherson notes, "our wood-fired Romaine Heart Salad, a unique twist on the classic Caesar, is a real favorite and has been on the menu since we opened."

McPherson says the secret to his success is quite simple: "I buy the best possible product I can buy, then cook it, season it and serve it."

WOOD-FIRED ROMAINE HEART SALAD

Makes 6 servings

1 three-pack Romaine hearts
2 egg yolks
2 tablespoons Dijon mustard
1 anchovy filet
1 or 2 garlic cloves
1 shallot
1/2 cup white balsamic vinegar
1/2 cup grated Parmesan cheese
1/2 to 1/3 cup blended oil
Lemon juice
Salt and pepper

Place all dressing ingredients in bowl; whisk. Slice Romaine hearts in half (6 pieces). Rub some grape seed oil on each half. Sprinkle with salt and pepper to taste. Place on hot grill for 1 to 1 1/2 minutes. Remove Romaine from grill, put on plate and drizzle with dressing.