

07/24/2007

The Times Record

timesrecord.com
Maine's Mid-coast Starts Here



'Perfection' is the goal in Troy Mains' kitchen — Troy Mains, chef de cuisine at Robinhood Free Meetinghouse in Georgetown, deglazes a frying pan with French brandy while searing a beef filet. Mains apprenticed under chef Michael Gagne at the acclaimed restaurant.

(Paul Cunningham / The Times Record)

'Perfection' is the goal in Troy Mains' kitchen

Seth.Koenig@TimesRecord.Com 07/24/2007

GEORGETOWN — The matter-of-fact way Troy Mains describes the way he likes his kitchen — "perfect" — doesn't betray even a pinch of arrogance.

Instead, the chef de cuisine at Georgetown's acclaimed Robinhood Free Meetinghouse exudes the drive of an athlete explaining that anything short of a championship is failure.

The Robinhood Free Meetinghouse is routinely lavished with five-star reviews, the top honor handed out by food critics. But one gets the impression that Mains is constantly pushing for a sixth star.

And with a bite of his pan-seared filet of beef — resting atop butternut squash, accompanied by asparagus and dressed with fried leeks and madeira sauce — one can't be so sure he doesn't deserve that sixth star.

With a three-foot flame licking out of the frying pan recently — the contents of which would become a mouth-watering filet of beef — the young chef was surrounded by order and expectation.

On the countertop to his left were four labeled pots containing different sauces, and absolutely nothing else. There was no sign of any mad-scientist chaos often popularly associated with busy kitchens.

No wayward spoons, no speck of salt left over from the previous night's dinner rush.

The pristine condition of his stainless steel and hardwood counters, the labels and food preparation processes are all just so. Mains, by some accounts, has taken the legendary attention-to-detail of Meetinghouse patriarch Michael Gagne to a new level.

Gagne, the executive chef and founder of the Georgetown eatery, has given Mains the reins of the kitchen while he focuses attention on his burgeoning biscuit business. The 72-layer Cream Cheese Biscuits — handmade by Gagne Foods, Inc. — are a recent award winner at the National Association of the Specialty Food Trade's Fancy Food Show in New York City, and are sought after by grocery stores around the country.

Is Mains as maniacal as the perfectionist Gagne?

"More," said Gagne. "Way more. With a twisted psychosis that I can't describe, but it comes with a creativity that is really evident in the cuisine, and that's great for our patrons."

Mains, 29, is a young chef in terms of the years since his birth, but don't be fooled by his driver's license. He started down the road toward culinary excellence at the age of 14, when — after a summer of digging clams — his father suggested he "go up the road and work for Michael at The Osprey."

By the age of 16, Mains had worked his way from washing dishes to preparing lunches at The Osprey Restaurant, also in Georgetown. Gagne then left The Osprey in 1994 to launch The Robinhood Free Meetinghouse in a nearby 1855 post-and-beam church.

Mains, in turn, then spent some of his early kitchen years running the show at Bath's Beale Street Barbecue and studying briefly under celebrity Chef John Besh at Restaurant August in New Orleans.

He returned to work with Gagne in Georgetown six years ago, inching his way up from being the Meetinghouse sous chef to his current position atop the daily operations of the kitchen.

With his current sous chef, California-native Aaron Holland, Mains has implemented theme weeks at the restaurant, highlighting culinary styles from Asian to Cajun. He has also started hosting seasonal wine-tastings, during which patrons try fine wines and a six-course themed dinner.

But special occasions aside, the magic of The Robinhood Free Meetinghouse is most on display as Mains and Holland prepare for each day at the restaurant like it's Game 7 of the World Series.

The pair goes over the day's menu before hungry customers show up at 5:30 p.m., and makes sure everything's ready.

Bowls are chilled and tomato garnish is prepared for the evening's first orders of cold cucumber soup, for instance. Such checklists are marked off for each item on the night's menu as Mains' kitchen helpers reassure him that each ingredient is precisely the way it needs to be (the chef de cuisine recalls one since-dispatched worker that insisted on leaving the seed guts in his slices of green pepper).

"I just expect everyone to care to an extreme just like I do," said Mains, who reads about the culinary arts and accomplished chefs whenever he's not at the restaurant, which isn't much. "When you have people waiting for four salads and that little something isn't there and ready, that's when it gets thick in there, and you have people getting yelled at by maniacal me."

But he's not an angry person. He's just competitive.

In fact, Gagne credits his protégé with maintaining an overall fun working environment at the Meetinghouse — as long as the food is up to his lofty standards.

"One thing about this kitchen is it's a laugh-a-minute," said Gagne. "It's a constant source of humor all day long. Kitchens run on morale. It's a source of humor even in the thick of it."

The restaurant serves between 5:30 p.m. and 9 p.m. seven days a week until mid-October, after which dinner is served Thursday through Saturday. Reservations are appreciated. Call 371-2188 for reservations.