

# The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY NOVEMBER 18, 2007

DINING/CORTLANDT MANOR

## A Culinary Explorer In a Land of Opportunity

By ALICE GABRIEL

**I**N July 2007, Neil Ferguson, having been abruptly dismissed as chef de cuisine at Gordon Ramsay's New York City franchise, saw an opening up the Hudson, adjusted his toque, and headed against the current to claim new ground. As executive chef at Monteverde at Oldstone Manor, a handsomely renovated restaurant, inn and spa on a river estate near Bear Mountain, Mr. Ferguson has brought fresh talent to fill Monteverde's luffing sails.

A veteran of three-star French restaurants, Mr. Ferguson makes lovely, soft-spoken food that would thumb its nose at the chipotle-charged restaurant scene downriver if it didn't have such nice manners.

His menu has a New American flair tamed by English reserve. Translucent tuna stippled with grapefruit swam with native trends, but duck magret — cooked rare, finished with satiny jus, nestled against caramelized endive and a creamy "fondant" potato cake — had flown in direct from Paris.

Mr. Ferguson mines the big backyard that is the Hudson Valley. In purées and pairings, he honors the old-fashioned virtues of Bartlett pears, jewel-toned grapes and perfect tomatoes (on my second visit, after the first hard frost, he had sensibly pulled the last from the menu).

What puts him in a league with neighboring chefs like Jeff Raider, at Valley in Garrison, and Vicky Zeph, of Zeph's in Peekskill, is his delicate handling of great stuff from pasture and garden, and his ability to exploit and integrate flavors without showing off.

Weary of wagyu and yuzu, I welcomed a painterly autumn salad of fruits, vegetables and herbs whose names I could pronounce: slices of golden squash, fluted carrot petals, fennel slips, tiny mottled beets, baby zucchini, impossibly small broccoli florets, slim haricots verts, pickled chanterelles, sweet purple plums, sugary figs — and a dainty tuft of greenery. Beautiful and playful too, it was the salad that kept on giving.

Mr. Ferguson enjoys a lot of breathing room. The original manor house, built in 1760 by Pierre Van Cortlandt on a splendid bank above the Hudson, was bought along with 29 surrounding acres in 2005 by Richard Friedberg, a real estate developer.

The clapboard and fieldstone mansion, which contains the restaurant, has grand proportions but exudes farmhouse charm. On a late fall night, the lights of a barge and tug glinted through the trees, and we could make out the industrial glow of Indian Point a few



*Roasted scallops topped by walnut praline, with bacon and white onion cream.*

miles south. The entry held wooden boxes filled with fragrant apples from a nearby orchard.

Curving stairs descend to the first dining room, a former ballroom with high ceilings, polished wood floors and touches of regal red. The second room, an enclosed veranda with whitewashed beams and big plate-glass windows, offers knockout river views. Bold aperitif posters, white linens and glorious sprays of mums and lilies contributed to a mood of easy formality. Service, overseen by Glenn Vogt, the general manager of Windows on the World, was fully on top of the details.

The precise menu offers seven appetizers and seven entrees. Among first courses, I loved the tender caramelized sweetbreads set on a pear purée and tweaked with candied sage (sweetbreads are an endangered species, and I am always heartened to find them on menus). Roasted sea scallops sprinkled with walnut praline and sauced with bacon and onion cream were so delicious we ordered them twice. Plump foie gras, properly seared, took a

turn with turnip purée, buttered radishes and ham gastrique. Those last-of-the-season heirloom tomatoes — golden, purple, green and red — came with wisps of prosciutto, pungent mint and green and opal basil.

Entrees struck a fine balance between exuberance and restraint. The kitchen had an especially deft touch with fish. Crisp-skinned dorade was paired with cipollini onions, sweet candied grapes and tart verjus. Pan-seared fluke was surrounded by a swarm of tiny cockles, sharpened with lemon and smoothed with cream. Golden-skinned breast of chicken was neatly sectioned and enriched with shallot purée, chanterelles and warm sherry vinaigrette. Rack of lamb spiked with calamata olives was wonderfully robust, and a surprisingly flavorful beef filet mignon came with what had to be one of the smoothest potato purées on earth.

The astute wine list offers a handful of moderately priced choices and more than a few trophy bottles. We chose from the strong selection of wines by the glass. The juicy 2006 Turkey Flat rosé (\$9) — garnet red and tasting of cranberries — was great for early fall. The bracing 2006 Grüner Veltliner from Sepp Moser (\$10), all citrus and Granny Smith, was perfect with the tuna appetizer. A versatile 2004 tempranillo from Abadia Retuerta (\$12), with cherry and anise flavors, was delicate enough for fish, intense enough for red meat.

Mr. Ferguson was pastry chef at L'Arpège in Paris; his delightful desserts are not to be passed over. Blue ribbons go to the clever apple tatin, raspberry clafoutis, vanilla roasted peaches with crème Catalán, and chocolate parfait with chocolate garnishes.

### Monteverde At Oldstone Manor

28 Bear Mountain Bridge Road  
Cortlandt Manor  
(914) 739-5000  
[www.monteverderestaurant.com](http://www.monteverderestaurant.com)

#### EXCELLENT

**THE SPACE** Graceful country mansion with modern sensibilities, manicured grounds and picture-book views of the Hudson River. Outdoor porch and terrace dining in fair weather. In season, a tasting menu is served under a grape trellis near the herb and vegetable gardens.

**THE CROWD** An adult crowd seeking a special night out; most men wore jackets, but the tone is relaxed.

**THE BAR** The room is sleek and discrete; live music on weekends in an adjacent salon. (The saxophonist Carmen Leggio and assorted combos on Saturday nights.)

**THE BILL** Appetizers, \$12 to \$22. Entrees, \$26 to \$42. Desserts, \$10. Seven-course tasting menu, by special arrangement, \$75; with wine pairings, \$105.

**WHAT WE LIKE** Salad with fruits and vegetables, caramelized sweetbreads, roasted sea scallops, tuna with grapefruit, foie gras, crisp dorade, duck magret, fluke with cockles, rack of lamb, beef filet mignon, apple tatin, raspberry clafoutis, roasted peaches, chocolate parfait.

**IF YOU GO** Lunch: Monday to Saturday, noon to 3 p.m. Dinner: Monday to Thursday, 5 to 9 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 5 to 10 p.m.; Sunday, 4 to 8 p.m. Sunday brunch: 10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.