

ASTER ★★★

101 S. Madison St., Middleburg;
540-687-4080

THE SCENE. Interior decorator-cum-chef Hump Astorga's year-old restaurant, in a country house off Middleburg's main street, is already a local favorite, and more and more city folk are jumping in the car for his exciting Modern American creations.

WHAT YOU'LL LOVE. From the two *amuses bouches* that quickly arrive to the expert service (You are wearing dark pants? A server switches a white napkin for black) to the distinctive look of each tiny dining room, you'll know that attention has been paid. A fire-lit lounge jumps with colorful cartoon cels, a cozy alcove features cabernet walls and black leather banquettes, and a glassed-in porch is lined with MFK Fisher paperbacks and Monet prints. Meanwhile, Astorga smilingly checks up on every table.

WHAT YOU WON'T. Some things sound better than they taste. Aster delivers a heavy dose of whimsy, and a few dishes come off as too precious (the delicate Vegetarian Tasting looked like it took a hundred hands to build) or clumsy (a sabayon-pesto-drenched crab cake).

BEST DISHES. The four-way squash tasting, with sweet and subtle Delicatta squash panna cotta across from a demitasse of rich, Blue Hubbard squash soup; green salad with Seckel pear and beets; a terrific appetizer of seared tuna and house-made lamb sausage with chipotle foam; perfectly poached black cod in coconut chili broth; a root-beer float with ginger ice cream and sassafras foam.

Expensive; entrées \$25 to \$36.