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Aster

editors' pick

address

101 S. Madison St., Middleburg, VA 20117

Phone: 540-687-4080

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overview

A meal at this restaurant is like a trip into the French countryside.

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average reader review ★★☆☆

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HOURS:

Tue-Sun 5:30-10 pm

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editorial review

2005 Fall Dining Guide

By *Tom Sietsema*

Washington Post Magazine

Sunday, October 16, 2005

**** and a half (out of four stars)**

Cuban-born Hump Astorga was an interior decorator before he became a chef, and there's plenty of evidence at Aster, his handsome five-room restaurant in Middleburg, that he still cares about presentation. Witness an amuse-bouche, one of several to come your way at dinner: Pickled carrots are threaded on a toothpick and set above a shot glass of cool, curry-scented soup. "Eat the carrots, and knock back the shot," you're told. An eye-catching first course of "deconstructed" clam chowder is staged on a plate divided into four parts: bite-size clam croquette; quarter-size corn custard; a couple of tablespoons of corn, potato and bacon ragout; and a small cup of clam "foam." Astorga can get carried away. "Cheeks and Bellies," a showy entree pairing barbecued veal cheeks and "pulled Thai pork bellies," is too sweet and busy, garnished with cabbage slaw, potato salad and grilled watermelon. That still leaves plenty to like. Hoisin-glazed ahi tuna is red-centered and arranged in upended pieces with a haystack of julienned vegetables and thin noodles, everything circled with a frothy carrot emulsion. Servers are as suave as any you'll find in the city, and desserts run to the whimsical and miniature: a tiny pineapple-carrot cake with orange-coconut panna cotta, perhaps, or a little root beer float composed with cherry-ginger ice cream and saffron foam.

Washington Post Staff Writer Nancy Lewis wrote about Aster in June, 2005:

Chef Creates a Masterpiece, From Seed to Flower

by *Nancy Lewis*

Aster Restaurant looks like the kind of place Middleburg should be famous for. Like the Michelin-starred inns scattered through the French countryside, the six-month-old restaurant blends history and a contemporary flair with impeccable attention to detail.

The 18th-century house, wrapped in a new solarium and garden room, was empty and waiting when interior-decorator-turned-chef Hump Astorga happened upon it last year after a 16-month search. He had planned to open his dream restaurant in Arlington, where his studies showed the demographics could support it. But he couldn't find a suitable space.

Astorga said he sensed immediately that the Middleburg site was the right place, though it was all "white walls and white trim" and 40 miles removed from where he wanted it to be. The decorator in Astorga kicked in first, transforming the building with color and art. He laid new carpet, added interesting lighting, hung the walls with antique prints and modern paintings, and placed handsome art pottery on pedestals and in traditional corner cabinets.

Then the chef side took over as Astorga fashioned a menu that blends the latest trends with traditional techniques; refined it for six weeks as he trained his kitchen staff and then his service personnel; and finally shared it with invited guests before opening for paying customers in early December.

The result is an exquisite gem of a restaurant that satisfies on every level, from the gracious welcome as you step through the door -- often from Astorga's partner of 30 years, Joanne Errico -- to the attentive goodbye as you leave. And there is a lot of great food in between.

The menu is small: eight appetizers, seven main courses, a half-dozen desserts. But each has layers of flavor, and often a laundry list of ingredients, to the point that the detailed descriptions seem like almost too much. But at Aster, it's all written down -- no five-minute recitations of specials that you can't possibly remember. And such full disclosures mean no unpleasant surprises (which for me would be grapefruit in any form) to ruin a wonderful evening.

Regardless of what you order, you'll be favored with a trio of little surprises from the kitchen as your meal progresses. The first amuse-bouche arrived soon after we were seated: a jumbo lump of sweet crab, scented with lavender and served with a few thin ringlets of lemon-infused fennel.

The second came just before our starters, and with instructions: First eat the small chunks of hot pickled carrot threaded on a skewer, then drink the chilled cucumber shooter. The contrasting tastes and textures seemed to explode in our mouths.

The most complex amuse preceded our second courses: a tiny mound of golden beet mousse with a tomato confit topped by a single, perfect asparagus tip.

All were different from the amuses presented to us on an earlier visit.

When Astorga visited our table -- he makes it a point to talk with every diner during the course of an evening -- the chef told us he arrives at the restaurant about 4 each morning to prepare these delightful little bites, which change daily. The workday for the Cuban-born chef often stretches to nearly midnight; he said he functions well on just four hours of sleep.

There is just as much attention to other details. The breads -- a moist and cheesy Asiago and a darker olive version -- are shipped from New York. The selective and well-priced wine list (about half the bottles priced between \$25 and \$50) is gleaned from many distributors and includes good buys you probably haven't heard of. Even the espresso has the distinctive foam you'd find in Italy or France.

The main dining room (the noisiest) overlooks the garden. There are also tables in the wine room (the quietest), the bar, the solarium and, in good weather, on a small patio.

Two custom U-shaped booths in the space connecting the bar and the garden room each can seat six.

Astorga, who had cooked at Market Street Bar & Grill in Reston and Melrose in the District and headed catering kitchens for District-based B&B and Fairfax County-based RSVP, said his work in the lucrative decorating field also gave him the opportunity to be a "professional diner" before he became a chef.

His attention to service has roots in visits to some of the world's greatest restaurants; Aster's service is polished and unobtrusive.

But the proof of a restaurant is, ultimately, in its food. And here it is superb.

Begin with the English pea soup: The velvety green liquid is poured around a roasted shallot flan decorated with crisp pancetta lardons. The flavors are intense, and each part of the dish accents the others.

The Four Ways to Begin appetizer has just a bit of bravura. Four small pinwheel-shape dishes hold four separate preparations: a tangle of perfectly grilled asparagus tips and roasted red peppers decorated with dots of balsamic vinegar; a salad of appaloosa beans; a slice of thyme-roasted tomato topped with fresh mozzarella and a teaspoon of olive oil sorbet; and a surprisingly tasty demitasse cup of celery water.

Other starters include an eggshell filled with soft-scrambled eggs, a gentle fluff of creme fraiche and a generous quenelle of caviar; a grilled pizzette (little pizza) of potato slices with truffles, creamy taleggio cheese and roasted peppers; and unctuously rich veal cheeks, braised in red wine, which showcase why chefs love to cook this lowly cut.

Main dishes are just as composed, and just as beautifully presented on a variety of fine china, but never precious.

The slices of tea-smoked duck breast are coiled into a mound atop cellophane noodles and baby bok choy. The "crab cake" isn't really a cake, but a heap of jumbo lump crab tinged with basil and served with potato cut into strands that resemble spaghetti. Seared scallops arrived with a melange of fava beans, morel mushrooms and asparagus that Astorga calls a cassoulet.

The multi-layering continues through dessert: A dark chocolate cup of white chocolate gelato complements a diminutive bread pudding -- perhaps the best I've ever tasted; banana fritters accompany a duo of chocolate pudding and banana pudding; buttermilk pineapple upside-down cake is paired with a coconut orange panna cotta.

Some would travel to France for an evening like this. For us, it's just a drive into the countryside.

[reader reviews](#)

Average reader rating: ★★★★★ (1 review)

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Well worth the drive to Middleburg!

Posted by stordella on Jul 18, 2005

Five of us went to Aster on a beautiful summer Saturday night. Everyone enjoyed the meal immensely. Between the three complementary "tastes" and the multiple components of other courses, we got to experience a panoply of flavors, textures, and presentations. Every one was turned out to perfection. Service was exemplary -- genuinely warm and welcoming. Any need, no matter how small, was instantly attended to. It's a welcome contrast to the arch and condescending staff attitudes common at some other top-class restaurants. Our favorite was the young but sincere bread boy, but that takes nothing away from the other staff. Dicor and seating also were good, and our table was positioned with an airy view of their garden. It was our most memorable meal since 1985, when a former employer blew over \$500 for four people at Le Pavillion when it was the number one expense account restaurant in DC.