

In Fine Style

The Escoffier Dinner at the Hermitage Hotel honors grand cuisine and history

BY KAY WEST • PHOTOS BY RON MANVILLE



In order to become a member of Les Amis d'Escoffier Society, you do not need to understand French. You do not need to be able to speak expertly of wine, cook a gourmet meal or know a secret handshake. You do have to be invited by a member to join, and once you accept, at your induction a red ribbon with a medal will be draped around your neck, and you will be gently tapped on the shoulder with a copper skillet. Visualize a knighting ceremony, minus Queen Elizabeth and a sword.

Les Amis d'Escoffier Society was founded in New York in 1936 by a group of epicures and former students of Auguste Escoffier, legendary French chef, restaurateur and culinary writer who had passed away the year before. The Society that honors him is comprised of members of the restaurant, beverage and hospitality industry, and business executives who share an appreciation for fine wine and food and have the desire to enjoy it with like-minded folk.

In that regard, there was much to appreciate and enjoy at the Annual Winter Dinner of Nashville's Les Amis at the Hermitage Hotel, where four new members were warmly welcomed into this club of convivial culinarians, officially formed in 1989.

The magnificent Beaux Arts style lobby was the setting for the dinner's prelude, a lively champagne reception with irresistible amuse-bouches on trays passed by staff in smart black coats and spotless white gloves. On this frigid night, the elegantly dressed crowd warmed themselves by the glowing fireplace, pulled away only by the opening of the double doors into the Grand Ballroom and the promise of more delights within.

The burlled walnut panels that line the walls of the ballroom are polished to such a high sheen they practically served as a mirror to the ivory damask-covered tables set for the divine five course meal created by the Hermitage's outstanding Executive Chef Tyler Brown and impeccably executed by his culinary team: chef du cuisine Andy Hayes, sous chefs Clayton Rollison and Cole Ellis, and pastry chef Andy Manchester.

Brown says he and his staff relish the challenge and opportunity to cook for this dinner, held at the Hermitage since 2003. "It's always a lot of fun. We get to take things to the next level, because this group expects a lot and we know they're eager to try something new."

Creating the menu is a process that begins when Brown and Hermitage Managing





Chef Tyler Brown,
third from left.



Director Greg Sligh have a preliminary discussion on what was served the year before and trade thoughts on what might be successful this year. "I think about it for a long time, just mulling it over in my head. This year, it came together in the middle of a sleepless night. I went downstairs at home and started writing it out. I start with the bones of the dinner: proteins I want to use on one side of the paper, and fruits, vegetables and starches on the other, and then it's sort of like playing picture-picture."

The pictures on this menu had a decidedly autumnal hue. Starting light with scallops that bowed to the season with a smear of roasted, then pureed, chestnut on the plate, each course took diners through a cold-weather garden of root vegetables and winter fruits, matched with braised meats, game and dry aged strip loin, with flavors that deepened in intensity along with the wines, chosen by Damian Serong, sales manager of Omni Beverage Co.

"We specialize in small production boutique wineries around the world," he explains. "We're really at the high end of the market. Our goal is to increase the level of confidence people have about trying unfamiliar wines. The Escoffier dinner finds a very enthusiastic and curious audience. When Tyler sends me the menu, I think about ideal pairings and I talk to Hotel Director Ray Minias. I choose three or four per menu item, then Tyler, Greg, Ray and I try the wines with the menu and make the final decision as a group. We used all my first choices, I'm happy to say!"

Next year, the Hermitage Hotel will mark its 100th birthday, more vibrant than ever thanks in no small part to Historic Hotels of Nashville, LLC, which purchased the property for \$14 million in 2000, and in 2002 undertook an 11-month, \$17 million restoration and renovation that led to its designation as a Mobile Five Star and AAA Five Diamond Property. Guests at the dinner went home with a gorgeous volume authored by noted Nashville historian Ridley Wills II. (*The Hermitage at 100* is now for sale at area bookstores and the hotel.)

As Greg Sligh, gracious host for the night, welcomed all he reflected, "When you talk about Nashville, you talk about the Hermitage. It's wonderful to think that nearly a century ago people were sitting in this very room having dinner. If we are good stewards, the next 100-year birthday will be celebrated in this room as well."

Les Amis d'Escoffier Society Dinner at The Hermitage Hotel — Dec. 4, 2009

Five courses by Chef Tyler Brown

Passed Hors d'oeuvres

Chandon Brut Classic, Napa Valley

Maine Diver Scallops, chestnut, Satsuma orange, Magness pear

Chablis AOC, Marcel Servin, Chablis 2007

Braised Pork Cheeks, pumpkin and salsify hash, Brussels sprouts leaves,

mulled cider jus

P Vin 'Rosella's Vineyard' Pinot Noir, Santa Lucia Highlands, 2007

Palmetto Squab, persimmon and black walnut bread pudding, mustard greens, cranberry

Dierberg Estate Vineyards Syrah, Santa Ynez Valley, 2005

Four Story Hills Dry Aged Striploin, Matsutake mushroom, romanesco, celeriac, sauce Bordelaise

Surh Luchtel Cabernet Sauvignon, Stagecoach Vineyards, Napa Valley, 2005

Apple Stack, cinnamon sauce, caramel ice cream, vanilla anglaise

Chateau La Fleur des Pins Graves, Bordeaux, 2007