

Executive Chef Brian Waters Gets Fired Up.



"It's good to stay hip to the current culinary trends, but it's also really, really important to know y our roots. Sometimes tried and true techniques are best. Sometimes simple is best – especially when you're dealing with the kind of product I get all the time."

- Saltus Executive Chef Brian Waters

When the masterminds behind Plums Inc. – owner Lantz Price and Chief of Operations Chip Dinkins – opened Saltus River Grill in 2001 they altered Beaufort’s culinary landscape. The bar was raised. In the intervening years, others answered the challenge. Some succeeded, others did not. Beaufort became a restaurant town. The farm-to-table movement took root. Anthony Bourdain published *Kitchen Confidential*. Celebrity chefs got their own TV network and for a while we were fascinated with the strange Japanese phenomenon called “Iron Chef.”

Through all this Saltus remained a favorite of locals and visitors alike, with a reputation for attracting the high rollers from out of town. Its hybrid design might work in midtown Atlanta, San Francisco or Manhattan. Only the view of the Beaufort River and the bridge spoil the illusion. The dining room feels at once both open and intimate, with broad strokes of chic as the sun dims and the candlelight flickers. This time of year the Napa style patio is a great spot to unwind with a cocktail by the fire pit and watch the snowbirds drift south for the winter. The elegant, minimalist stone bar looks long enough to land a small plane on, but patrons may be three deep on a busy Saturday night. Celebrity sightings are not uncommon.

Yet beyond all the style and fashion there is substance: the food.

“I think Saltus is a place that serves simple good food prepared with solid technique.”

That’s Executive Chef Brian Waters when asked to describe his restaurant to a stranger. He pauses, searching for something else.

“You know I have a hard time answering that question,” he says. “In a lot of ways this is very much a fine dining restaurant, but at the same time, anybody can come here and eat and recognize the food and relate to it on many levels.

“You can come here for a 3-course meal or just have a steak, or some sushi and a drink at the bar. You can have a glass of wine and a small plate and still have a great dinner without spending a ridiculous amount of money.”

Southern Living Magazine calls Saltus’ raw bar the best in South Carolina, offering up selections of shellfish from both coasts in addition to local shrimp and oysters and the only sushi on the Beaufort waterfront.

Chef Waters is also a recent convert to the sacred order of the wood fire grill which both simplifies and expands choices for chef and guest alike. “We brought the wood grill a la cart menu back to the forefront. It’s no longer just composed dishes,” he explains. “You can come in

and get something as simple as a grilled piece of fish or steak and a side of your choice. As for everything else, we change with the seasons.”

Saltus may bill itself as an “urban seafood grill,” but if you get the urge to cowboy up for dinner, the chef will be happy to slap a thick cut New York strip on the wood grill, or how about a whole rack of lamb?

Tonight my wife Susan and I are here at the Chef’s invitation to sample some of the new seasonal offerings on the menu. He’ll toss in a favorite or two, as well. He asks if we want to know what’s coming to the table. We opt out. Let it be an evening of surprises.

We slip into one of the cozy, intimately lit booths adjacent to the bar and place our full confidence in our server Daniel, to decide the wine pairings. Saltus offers an extensive list of wines by the glass, bottle or both. Our first is the Eidosela Albarino, a crisp, floral

Spanish white with undertones of green apple. It’s an instant favorite and spot on for the first plates.

FIRST COURSE



The Chef's play on Clam Chowder is a bowl brimming with local clams in the shell, roasted fingerling potatoes and crispy bacon in white wine butter sauce. The pate is a sinful blend of chicken liver and duck leg confit plated with Brant Family Farm's arugula salad, grilled croutons, pickled okra and Dijon mustard.

I'm an idiot when it comes to anything that remotely resembles pate, but this mix of confit (duck braised in its own fat) with the chicken liver is pure decadence on toast – one giant leap beyond simple liver. The accompaniments add different dimensions of flavor and texture.

Non-southerners might be put off by the bold choice of the pickled okra. Fine. That's more for us. The plate's a beautiful balance of savory and sweet.

The chowder is almost too pretty to eat. The clams are fat and juicy, fresh out of the Broad River, swimming in a rich broth brimming with chopped fingerling potatoes, thick-cut bacon lardons and laced with pepper and chives. This may be the perfect example of what the chef means when he talks about "minimal manipulation" of ingredients. It's all right there to see and savor. We both agree this may be the best variation on clam chowder we've had – at least in recent memory – and trust me, that's a lot of chowder over the years. Two words describe both dishes: rustic elegance.

SECOND COURSE

Daniel clears the way for the next course with the un-oaked Lincourt Chardonnay from California. It's smooth and mellow, a bit floral, with nice acidity – kind of like drinking an old Linda Ronstadt tune. We sense fish on the way.

The Blackened Dorado – one of the restaurant's most popular dishes – is topped with caramelized



fennel on a mound of potato and crab gratin in beurre blanc. The Dorado is a beautifully flavored fish – not overpoweringly fishy, but deep and complex and fully complimented by the luxurious gratin. The fennel and crab play their own notes in this quartet and the fish practically melts in your mouth. Spectacular.

Saltus River Grill

Written by Mark Shaffer

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