

ICON

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dining

ROBERT GORDON

MATT'S RED ROOSTER

Matt McPherson has come home to roost. The talented chef — the “Matt” in Matt’s Red Rooster — grew up in Flemington, NJ. After graduating from Hunterdon Central High School, he flew the coop to earn a culinary degree at the prestigious Culinary Institute of America. Matt then embarked on a peripatetic path that led him to Arizona, the famed Sea Grill in the Big Apple’s Rockefeller Center in the Big Apple, Relais Chateaux on Little Palm Island in the Keys, Princeton NJ (Les Copains) and Hamilton’s Grill Room in Lambertville. In 2004, Matt and his roommate at the CIA found and then founded their dream restaurant in McPherson’s own backyard in Flemington. In no time at all, the Matts’s culinary talents drew raves including being named “Flemington’s Best Restaurant” by *New Jersey Monthly*. Flattering stuff, but it might unintentionally mislead, inadvertently sounding parochial. This spiffy, charming BYOB is anything but parochial — it’s a restaurant to crow about in any milieu.

Matt’s Red Rooster wins on cosmopolitan gastronomy in an atmosphere awash in idyllic charm. The physical plant is a tastefully rehabbed turn-of-the-century Victorian house. Yes, Matt McPherson did indeed come home to roost. Breathing refined grace from its comely front porch to its high-ceilinged Victorian dining rooms upstairs and down, Matt’s Red Rooster insinuates a winsome rustic elegance that embellishes gracious dining.

The porch offers alfresco dining that’s the equal of alfresco anywhere. Open-aired, subtly elegant, tranquil, homey and retro — the Rooster’s porch is a prized perch by any fine-dining standards. Inside, the peach-walled main dining room circumscribed by comely wall-length windows glows in white-tablecloth elegance. Candles flicker lazily on each tabletop while aromas from the open-kitchen’s wood-fired grill waft tantalizingly through the air.

Yes, then there’s the food. Matt McPherson’s style can most aptly be described as Contemporary American flourished with some splendid French tweaks. The Appetizer List covers an impressively wide swath of the taste spectrum. Eight apps appear on the regular menu — a relatively low number in this era of mult-page-all-things-for-all-people menus. What the Red Rooster’s restrained approach promotes and enhances however is supernal consistency — a hallmark of this well-organized talented kitchen. Iterative preparations perfect the repertoire. Thus mistakes and other sour notes are reduced and the kitchen routinely delivers what the menu promises.

Jumbo lump crabmeat redolent of sweet chili aioli boosts the mellow succulence of avocado that’s been grilled lightly on the grill. A Roasted Red & Golden Beet Tower pyramids a melange of fresh garden color and sweetness upward from an invitingly garnished plate with cranberry goat cheese and aged balsamic. Tuna, Two Ways, Seared & Tartare partners these two popular preparations on a dish puddled with kickin’ home-made wasabi cream and “Rooster” sauce. The accompanying crisped black and white sesame-encrusted wontons retain their delicate consistency. Poblano Pepper Stuffed with Pulled Pork & Aged Cheddar is accompanied by fire-roasted salsa and sour cream. A mildly spiced Griggstown Farm Charcuterie Plate pairs Apple Chicken Sausage and Truffle Chicken Liver Paté with earthy Manchega cheese.

Three soups — Wild Mushroom, Shrimp & Potato Bisque, and a Soup du Jour — are offered, or you can order a sampler of all three. A Wedge of Iceberg is topped with Maytag blue cheese and speckled with apple-smoked bacon to give a retro dish a savvy update. The grill imparts a smoky essence to Wood-Fired Romaine Heart and adds delicate oomph to creamy Parmesan dressing flaked with grated Parmesan.

The entrées provide the best showcase for the chef’s skills. Cedar-Planked Roasted Salmon perks when dressed with roasted yellow-pepper rustic emulsion and tomatillos. Chef Matt pays yummy homage to the tastiest of classic French tradition in a Rack of Colorado Lamb clad in puckery delicious rosemary Dijon demiglaze. He takes the same approach in his recipe for Center Cut Filet Mignon, which is served swaddled in savory bacon blue cheese crust.

I was delighted to see Tilapia En Papillote on the menu. This technique, which pouches food in “papillote” (French for parchment) to retain every drop of juice lost via the cooking process, was trendy in the ‘90s. Of late, it has fallen out of vogue, but Matt’s dish is masterfully conceived and executed. Tilapia, a bland fish of itself, soars when prepared alongside its papillote payload of little-neck clams and steamed spring veggies with lemon thyme spicing. Few renditions vie for flavor with Matt’s Seared Jumbo Lump Crab Cake, which gets more mojo from Roasted Red Pepper Remoulade. The chicken plate, Grilled Griggstown Farm Poussin (very young chicken) takes wing with fruity/gutsy warm sun-dried fruit chutney that gives flavorful bursts to each forkful.

A well-chosen array of desserts offer additional after-dinner bliss. The house-made crème brulee and bread pudding are tasty renditions — neither stray too much from the classic French. Many desserts, like Chocolate Peanut Butter Mousse, Chocolate Torte, and Cheesecake, trace their provenance to New Hope’s superb pastry-Mecca, Zoubi.

Matt McPherson and his wife, Erin (also a Flemington native), are active in a number of charities. Matt sits on the Board of the Wellness Community of Central Jersey, which helps cancer patients. He’s also on the Board of the Polytech Culinary Arts program of Hunterdon County, which honored him in 2005 as one of their most successful graduates.

Matt’s Red Rooster is closed Mondays, but usually buzzing nonetheless with benefit dinners, cooking classes and private events. The puzzler about Matt’s Red Rooster, of course, is why and whence the name? It’s supposed to connote American fare and a relaxed casual setting. In France, the rooster and its characteristic call of “Cocorico” is the national symbol of pride. Pride works for this restaurant, too. Put this place in France, and even the feisty French would be crowing about it. ■

MATT'S RED ROOSTER

22 Bloomfield Ave., Flemington, NJ 08822
(908) 788-7050

Hours:	T-Fri 5:30-close; Sat 5-close; Sunday 5-8
Credit cards:	accept major cards
Reservations:	Necessary for weekend
Cuisine:	Contemporary American with some splendid French tweaks. The kitchen routinely delivers what the menu promises.
Atmosphere:	Refined grace from its comely front porch to its high-ceilinged Victorian dining rooms.
Entrées:	\$14-\$34
Website:	mattsredroostergrill.com
Chef/Owner:	Matt McPherson