

Mark Shaffer & the Moveable Feasters take on Emily's... with pleasure!



In the bar:

Patron1 (to me): That was my favorite lens when I was in the business.

Patron2: What business was that?

Patron1: The photography business.

Patron2 (incredulous): The photography business? The photography business? When were you in the photography business?

Patron1: Hell, I used to do work for you!

Prologue (the set-up)



In the interest of full disclosure I have a confession to make: I am an Emily's regular. So are my wife and a whole lot of other people with whom I associate often and in this very establishment. This makes me nervous – not because I don't feel up to the task, but because I just don't have enough space to tell all the stories I want to tell, to convey the absolute essence of a place I consider The Real Deal – and it's my job to find these places. I also have mixed feelings about giving up what so many of us who hang out in the bar might consider to be "secret locals information," that we'll suddenly be overwhelmed by invading hordes of tourists in Bermuda shorts and black socks, or worse, packs of pierced, disaffected youth baring fresh tribal tattoos, knocking back Jaeger Bombs as if the Apocalypse were imminent.

And then again, I have to remember that about a year and a half ago we were the outsiders who stumbled off the well-trod path of Bay Street, up West Street, onto Port Republic and into Emily's. In short order new friendships were forged, connections were made and a real sense of community was established. We felt at home. We still do.

In the Sandlapper Magazine's book on their favorite South Carolina restaurants, Stop Where The Parking Lot's Full, Tim Driggers quotes me as saying that "Emily's is Beaufort's living room." While he was obviously desperate for a quote, I think now that I should have chosen a different analogy. What owners Tommy and Mary Winburn have forged on this corner of Port Republic is more like Beaufort's kitchen, a place where good food, good drink and good friends converge without pretense or affectation. Emily's is the kind of place where you can tailor your evening to suit your fancy, your wallet or both.

Good Eats

We convene this edition of the Moveable Feast in the large oval booth in the front of the dining

room. Chef Mike Long is hard at work in the kitchen and in a first for the Feast, the owners join us at the table, and it doesn't take for the conversation to take off.

On Tape:

Feaster3: Okay, no more talk about politics, this is supposed to be about the food.

Feaster2: No more Mark Sanford?

Feaster3: Not unless he's joining us for dinner.



Soup Course

- She Crab
- Spicy Gumbo
- French Onion
- Cold Cucumber
- Gin Tomato

On Tape:

Tommy: This is the Lowcountry Tomato, but when we redo the menu we're going to go back to the traditional name, which is Gin Tomato.

Feaster1: "Gin" tomato?

Tommy: G-I-N, gin tomato soup. We were hesitant to call it that because a lot of people don't like gin.

Feaster3: It doesn't taste at all like gin. But I get a real brightness of flavor. It's more intense than a basic tomato soup. Excellent.

I'm a believer that the essence of a restaurant can be found in a bowl of soup. Show me a kitchen that consistently turns out great soups and I'll show you a kitchen that rarely screws up an entrée. The Spicy Gumbo lives up to it's promise, but not overwhelmingly so, and it's brimming with the good stuff. The She Crab is exactly as it should be: creamy and rich with the essence of the crab and brought to life with just the right amount of sherry – the key to unlocking the true flavor of the dish.

"We have wonderful French Onion," says Mary. The melted Swiss cheese tops the bowl and the croutons ooze volcanically over the rim. "Our French Onion is the best," Tommy offers. It's not a boast. As far as Tommy's concerned this is a simple fact. A lot of long time patrons will back him up.

On Tape:

Feaster4: What's in the stock of the French Onion?

Tommy: I'd have to kill you if I told you.

Feaster4: So something really good, then.

Tommy: Well, it's simple. All of our soups are simple. We have people who rave about the French Onion. They rave.

Feaster3: All of these soups are really distinctive in character.

Feaster1: They've got a lot going on.



The soup du jour is the last to sample and a complete departure from the others. Chef Mike's Chilled Cucumber Soup is served "up" in a martini glass and garnished with a delicate yellow dill flower. Somehow he's managed to find an appealing balance of flavor and texture that is at once cool, savory, and light as sea foam. Someone simply sums it up as "awesome." With the mercury pushing triple digits, this is a great choice as a starter.



Tapas Course

- Tuna Tartar
- Crab Cakes
- Fried Oysters
- French Cut Lamb Chops
- Grilled Quail
- Smoked Salmon
- Oyster Sampler (Morgan, Rockefeller & Casino)
- Peppered Emu Steak

Emily's is serious about Tapas. Two full pages of the menu list 45 of what the Spanish call "small plates" (we won't bore you with the etymology). Suffice it to say that these little dishes are meant to be sampled, shared – passed around the table, usually over drinks or as appetizers. On Tapas Tuesdays at Emily's the tapas menu is discounted. Chef Mike prepares a few specials, encouraging customer feedback – something that Mary Winburn says is essential to the restaurant. "We really value our customers and what they have to say," she says. "We're always looking for ways to improve, to find out what's working and what's not."



On Tape:

Feaster5: The Emu's very good. It's usually a dry bird – got no fat, but whatever they do to it with the spices, the marinade – it's juicy.

Tommy: I love the Emu.

Feaster3: It's not really like a bird at all but more like beef.

Feaster5: Like flank steak. Hard to believe it's a bird.

Since an emu tastes like, well, an emu, I will simply report that it does in no way taste like chicken.

On Tape:

Feaster1: This has always been the place for crab. Softshell season here is nuts.

Feaster4: It's simple. There aren't a lot of fillers – it's pretty much all crab and the remoulade has a tantalizing spice to it.

The rest of the seafood tapas all garner raves for both taste and presentation. The sashimi grade Tuna Tartar is deep red, diced with finely chopped onion, served in a martini glass and garnished with a green sail of avocado. The fish melts in the mouth like butter. The Smoked salmon is sliced thin, rolled into “blossoms” and plated with diced red onion, capers, cream cheese and wafers. The broiled oysters – prepared in several different ways – are scarfed in a kind of frenzy. I'm told they were very good. The fried oysters are, as Mary aptly sums up, “to die for.”

The rest of the chef's choices come highly recommended. The quail are butterflied, lightly seasoned and grilled. The birds fall off the tiny bones, juicy and full of delicate flavor – an ironic culinary answer to the emu. The French Cut Lamb Chops are entrée-sized, like miniature bone-in ribeyes, flame-kissed, rare (as God intended), beautifully tender, and an instant favorite for this dedicated carnivore.



Entrees

- Steak Au Poivre
- Shrimp and Grits
- Shrimp and Scallops Curry

As our server, Jeff (who somehow managed this chaos with skill and finesse), sets down the entrees, seven adults, including the Winburns, all nearly simultaneously utter the same three words, “Oh my God.” This continues to echo around the table for several seconds.

Shrimp and grits, the ultimate Lowcountry comfort food and something which, at it's mere mention to visitors from cultures ignorant of such basic delights, is often greeted with a

resounding, “huh?” Emily’s award-winning version represents what this humble writer feels just may be the epitome of the indigenous dish. This is a big bowl of southern self-indulgence. The grits are smooth, rich and creamy and so is the sauce, yet somehow the true sweetness of the fresh local shrimp never is ever lost.

“This is one of my favorites,” says Tommy, “Shrimp and Scallops Curry. I love curry. We always had shrimp curry at home.” Unlike some Indian and Asian variations, this curry bears a subtle heat with undertones of smoky sweetness that works amazingly well with the still succulent shrimp and scallops served over rice. This might be the surprise of the night.



On Tape:

Feaster1: That’s a thick steak. 2 inches, at least.

Tommy: That’s the 12 ounce.

Feaster3: It’s beautifully cooked and sauce absolutely makes it. These potatoes, though, are really incredible.

Feaster4: One of my favorite things here, the potatoes.

It’s a well-known fact that I am a big fan of the Steak Au Poivre here, and tonight it’s particularly excellent. This is the restaurant’s signature dish and the best selling item on the menu by a long, long ways. The fillet really does melt in your mouth. A friend and fellow regular recently told me that he’d ordered nothing but the Weiner Schnitzel for years until one evening he made the leap of faith and decided to go for the Au Poivre. “Now that’s all I get when I come here,” he says. There are worse ruts in which to be stuck.



And then there are the potatoes. Chef, travel writer and infamous carnivore Anthony Bourdain has proclaimed that where the consumption of good meat is concerned all else is simply filler, especially potatoes. I’m willing to bet these babies might just bring him to his knees. Another closely guarded secret of the kitchen, they’re the potato equivalent to heroin. Enjoy the addiction.

The evening approaches its zenith. Plates have been passed, picked clean and removed. Stories, smiles, laughter and opinions have all been shared and shared well. The familiar sounds of gustatory delight taper off. Bread has been broken in the best sense of the phrase.

“Affordable elegance,” is how Mary Winburn describes Emily’s. “We’re not trying to compete with fancy places,” says Tommy. He’s still busy on the Steak Au Poivre, as enthusiastic about his own food as any customer. I like that. I also like the idea that time seems to move a little slower back here on Port Republic Street. Perhaps this is part of the reason Emily’s has been a local fixture for nearly 20 years. The intimate mahogany paneled dining room is much the same as it was before the Winburns bought the place about a decade ago. Back then competition was fierce for a seat at the small bar up front. Regulars still reminisce about that in the “new” space next door, around the 30-foot antique mahogany bar Tommy found on Ebay in Appleton, Wisconsin. As the story goes he strikes a deal, buys a one-way plane ticket and rents a truck to haul his prize back to Beaufort. {mosimage}

On Tape:

Feaster1: Was it a pretty place?

Tommy (deadpan): I didn't see much of the town.

(Laughter all around)

Tommy: So the guy picks me up at the airport and says 'lets go see the bar.' Great. We get further and further out of town – really, really out of town. Finally, we drive up to a farm with a barn and I go 'what are doing here?' And he opens the barn up and there's the bar in about a hundred different pieces. I thought it was intact. I was devastated. I almost hyperventilated on the spot.

The Bottom Line

The kitchen (still in the original space) may very well be the smallest in town, but the quality of what's coming through the doors is definitely big. Chef Mike Long is a man of few words, but his food practically speaks in tongues.

"You come in here and you leave the world behind," observes one of the group who's been coming to Emily's for longer than the Winburn's have owned it. "It's just a magical place, a special place."

The Lowdown

Location: 906 Port Republic St., Downtown Beaufort

Atmosphere: "Affordable elegance"

Cuisine: "Magnificent seafood, steaks and tapas"

Alcohol: Full bar, eclectic wine list, good prices

Hours: Monday through Saturday, 5pm – 10pm, Bar open 4pm – 2am

Reservations: 843-522-1866 and via the website

Etcetera: Included in Sandlapper Magazine's book, *Stop Where The Parking Lot's Full* as a South Carolina favorite.

Website: www.emilysrestaurant.com

Mark Shaffer can be found in the bar at Emily's most Mondays (and on various other days of the week). His email address is backyardtourist@gmail.com