

# DelawareToday

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DT Beach Guide

## Espuma Evolves

In a town famed for fine dining, Espuma has been the gourmards' go-to spot since it opened in Rehoboth Beach in 1999. Espuma, Spanish for foam, quickly established a reputation for avant-garde cuisine. Consider venison loin with wild mushroom and truffle quiche and escargot pot pie.

The intimate restaurant won numerous awards, making it an attractive prospect for potential buyers. But purchasing a popular eatery in a small town is risky business. Espuma's identity was linked with founder Kevin Reading's bold style. To complicate matters, Reading was opening Nage on nearby Route 1.

The challenges didn't faze Jay Caputo, the Dover native who purchased Espuma in May 2004. "If I had to start from scratch, it wouldn't be that much different — the size, the type of restaurant," says Caputo, who graduated from the Culinary Institute of America in 1997.

Nevertheless, Caputo — formerly executive chef at Stephen Starr's Tangerine in Philadelphia and Roux 3 in Newtown Square, Pa. — was hardly willing to maintain the status quo. "I took some of Kevin's ideas, but I wanted to incorporate my own philosophies," he says. "It began to evolve."

The restaurant, which recently underwent a facelift, now sports an urban, youthful attitude. Caputo put his time at Tangerine to good use. Like that Moroccan-inspired restaurant, Espuma exudes an exotic lushness. A secluded dining room to the right of the newly configured doorway resembles a pasha's den, and the "Buddha Bar" CD plays over speakers.

The main dining room's nectarine and sea foam-colored walls, flecked with glitter, evoke images of the sunny Spanish Riviera. Shimmering sheer curtains offer glimpses into the bar area. A curved nook shelters the new chef's table, where diners can sample five or more specially prepared courses.

The colors, the cool tile floor and amber sconces provide the primary artistic touches. There are no fussy adornments. You might say the same of the menu. Whereas Reading often fused several striking flavors in a single dish, Caputo

A new owner takes one of the beach's best restaurants to a new level.

by Pam George



adheres to a California straight-from-the-farm approach, developed while working in San Francisco. "I try to take the best ingredients I can find and highlight their flavor," he says. "I stick to three or four flavors per dish."

The California penchant for freshness still encourages innovation. "Espuma is not the place to come if you want a Caesar salad," Caputo notes. It is, however, the place to visit for a "bacon and eggs" salad, a nest of lacy frisee garnished with a cornmeal-encrusted egg and three apple-wood-smoked bacon strips.

The soft-boiled egg's golden coat and still runny yolk provide the "Wow" factor.

But we were more impressed by the black truffle vinaigrette that glistened on each soft spike. The decadent taste launched a craving that wasn't satisfied until I'd devoured every leaf. The taste was the culinary equivalent of cashmere.

The duck confit appetizer, large enough to serve as an entrée, also got a boost from its accompaniments, a cherry compote and chewy dollops of manchego cheese that were gorgeous together. Though undeniably delicious, the garnishes were merely handmaidens to the tender duck confit. The glossy meat slid across the tongue, softly releasing its succulent juices.

Like the duck, the three-day pork

caressed my palate, oozing its sensual flavors of garlic thyme and wine-scented stock. The pork lolls in its seasonings for 24 hours before being seared and braised in stock. It then wallows in the stock for another 24 hours to soak up the savory blend.

The final product, bathed with bacon essence, looked like a thick filet mignon, but the meat fell into luscious flakes at the touch of a fork. The pretty package sat atop a puree of parsley root, a curious carrot-like root that tastes like a mild parsnip.

Fans of Reading's Espuma will be happy to see paella on the menu. Caputo's version is a little richer, he says. On our visit the seafood, which varies depending on availability, included a curled lobster tail, perky mussels and scallops. The chicken is slowly braised in broth that's later used to cook the rice. The festive dish satisfies all senses, from the heady scent of saffron to the colorful tumble of shellfish and yellow-orange rice.

We had a few nitpicky complaints. Espuma's sweet pea soup was undeniably fresh but bland. I felt like I was sipping a "green food" drink. The Maine lobster sausage did nothing for the dish. Cut into tiny round circles that looked like sliced bay scallops, the sausage had a squishy consistency and contributed no flavor.

A sampler of crème brûlée desserts – green tea, cinnamon and vanilla – boasted all the right textures, with its crisp crust and silky custard. Only the kitchen took a timid approach. Green hue aside, the difference between the variations was too subtle. The Meyer lemon Napoleon – zesty custard sandwiched between shortbread cookies – packed more punch, especially when paired with the blood orange relish.

Service was polished and efficient – maybe too efficient. When we pushed aside our platter of bread, roasted garlic and tapenade to make room for our appetizers, the waiter whisked it away

without asking if we were done. Upon learning that I like smoky Chardonnay, the server brought me a smokier wine than I'd ordered. Although delicious, it was \$5 more than my first choice – a fact he neglected to share.

I can't quibble with the overall wine selection. There are up to 120 options. "For me, the focus is wine that pairs well with our food," Caputo says. "We don't think big Cabs and buttery, oaky Chardonnay are good matches. We keep it fresh and vibrant."

You'll find plenty of Pinot Noir, Shiraz, Sauvignon Blanc and the sprightly Viognier, as well as some interesting choices, including Big Ass Shiraz from Australia and Green and Red Chiles Mill Zinfandel from California.

Since Espuma's sale, Caputo and Reading have become friends, Caputo says. Not surprising. The two chefs share a love for the dining experience, an urbane event punctuated by memorable dishes. There's no rush to turn over tables here, despite the resort location.

Consequently, although the décor and the menu are different, Espuma's original spirit is still strong. ■

## ESPUMA

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Jay Caputo, Espuma's new chef/owner, has given the popular restaurant a cosmetic and menu makeover. Caputo, formerly the executive chef at Tangerine in Philadelphia, embraces the California philosophy of using exceptional ingredients served at their peak.

Dinner Prices: appetizers \$7-\$16; entrées \$21-\$35; desserts \$8-\$9.

Highlights: crispy leg of duck confit; bacon and eggs salad; paella; three-day pork; Meyer lemon Napoleon.