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A rethought Espuma does it better than most

By **ERIC RUTH**
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Espuma ★★★1/2 (very good)

The best time in Rehoboth Beach comes when the sun starts to slip away and the streets begin to come alive. Sun-scorched mommies push yowling tots toward the salvation of an icy treat and bedtime. Oldsters shuffle nowhere fast, too wise to heed time's hurried march; while the teens race to and from endless anticipation — too young to waste any time at all.

It seems they're all searching for the evening's promise, for a soft landing to settle their week-end flight from jobs, from stress, from school, from life. We hunt endlessly for that perfect refuge, for that place to truly get away when we "get away."

Inside Espuma, that full-tilt summer beach boogie fades to black. The noise, the traffic, the lingering worries of life are too weak to invade this sanctuary, too brash and rude to be welcome where the lights are soft, the mood is cozy and the manner is elegant.

The servers' outfits nearly fade into the hushed crimson tones as they rush about with proper precision, bringing dishes that entice with sexy, splashy personality: A beefy, bearded man in cook's gear (could he be the chef?) watches intently from the kitchen, probably pleased with the subdued bustle.

This is, after all, a world he created.

When Jay Caputo left suburban Philadelphia's highly regarded Tangerine to open his own place, he could have thrown himself back into the sizzling sauté pan of the city scene and probably would have done well. Instead, he gave up on that town's restaurant rat race, and in the process, gave us a great way to get away from ours.

When the Dover native bought Espuma last year, he also could have changed the name (and risked losing its solid reputation). When he planned to make his mark on Rehoboth's Restaurant Row, he could have kept diners happy enough by trotting out those pretentious fruit-meets-meat contraptions that too many chefs equate with excellence.

Instead, he did what he set out to do: Create one of the best restaurants in one of the East Coast's best dining towns.

The beautiful thing is, he does it in such simple ways. A starter of chewy sourdough with olive tapenade and roasted garlic is a humble dish that can achieve great things — but only when the bread is beautiful (it is) and the toppings have that sweet-and-salty beauty (they do). A salad is something that's tossed off as fodder in many restaurants, but it can become a classy character when lettuce meets a creamy egg (softly boiled, then fried), finds chewy nuggets of high-end Nueske's bacon, and announces its presence with quiet accent of black truffles, truffle oil and top-shelf sherry vinegar (\$12).

Caputo knows a crunchy duck confit appetizer (\$13) doesn't need frills to find a noble place; it needs to be treated with respect for its rustic instincts. The duck's perfectly oily juices and brothy sauce give the flavors a place to mingle with deep, sweet flavors of caramelized shallots. Caputo gives new reasons to love the ubiquitous "seared rare tuna" (\$16) when he gives the thin-sliced fillet a buttery, herby accompaniment of guacamole — the bursts of flavor are juicy, sweet (and even a little beefy).

When high-end dishes are done right, they seem to create a flavor that is new, a taste that is more than the sum of its ingredients. Citrusy accents of orange



marmalade and herbal notes of arugula stand up cautiously to the fatty richness of seared foie gras (\$17). This chunk of liver may be too small, but the foie-gras ravioli and muscat-apricot reduction give the dish a singular character and bright flavor.

Entrees continue the appetizers' sly strategy: (1) Take seemingly simple concepts; (2) Refine them with high-end ingredients; (3) Then indulge their nature. Plain old "surf and turf" can be magical, but when the steak is cut from the most flavorful part of the rib-eye, it can be truly amazing, especially when it's accompanied by lobster fritters and a saucy sauté of fresh-shucked corn with wild mushrooms (\$35). The paella (\$30; \$58 for two people) shows how attention to details — perfect al-dente basmati rice, thoroughly harmonized flavors — deliver the rich character and clear impact you so rarely see in the gloppier versions of the dish.

Of course, the multitude of lobster, chicken, chorizo and mussels piled on the paella can't hurt its cause. Such an unstinting attitude also elevates a dish that sounds like predictable stuff (and in other restaurants, probably would be):

Espuma's wild Pacific escolar (\$32). There's no innovation in crusting a juicy fish with herbs; there's nothing new in joining it with a shellfish broth or pairing it with clams. The magic lies in how Caputo takes such a concept and makes it new — makes it speak of flavor and harmony — by ensuring the broth is briny and deep, the sweet fish has support from salty prosciutto, and that the perfume of herbs lingers on the tongue.

Caputo seems to know about desire, and indulgence, and he somehow knows we will not be able to resist a moan when we taste his caramelized Maine scallops (\$30) — not so much because of the nicely caramelized shellfish, or the shitaake-celery salad, or even the sweet-corn broth. It is sheer sensuous food-lust, and fork-stopping goodness, that we'll remember about it — the buttery, almost obscenely sensual taste of black truffles that fill the ravioli.

In a world so enamored with sexiness, it's good to find X-rated indulgences that are appropriate for all ages. Truth be told, they're just what I came to the beach to find.