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## Espuma's Arranged Marriage of Flavors

By EVE ZIBART

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**T**HE NAME MEANS “foam” in Portuguese, but it's the sweep of the wave underneath that comes to mind at Rehoboth's Espuma Restaurant. You think you know the curve, the speed, the tide, and for sure it's familiar; but somehow it's always a surprise, and a little of a shock. Owner-chef Jay Caputo's menu may not look all that tricky, but there is clearly a pro in the kitchen, and this wave is a helluva ride.

Caputo is that most seductive of chefs: one who values powerful flavors but keeps them in control rather than letting one rich and unruly indulgence run away with the dish. Nor does he pile them on, leaving your senses overwhelmed and bedraggled.

His entry into the deconstruction game is a “bacon and eggs” salad that combines really sweet and meaty bacon (Nueske's slab-cut applewood-smoked bacon) with a four-minute egg, shocked to stop the yolk just as the runniness becomes mousse-like, then rolled in finely ground cornmeal and hot-fried for a moment. The result, which looks like a traditional Scotch egg, is much more fun for the tongue, progressively crunchy, slick (the white) and smooth, and the tang of the microgreens garnish and the whiff-of-truffle vinaigrette alternatively ground the flavors and spark them.

Caputo's “decadent foie gras sampler,” which changes with seasonal fruits, is currently prepared as a ravioli of foie gras with a rich compote of fresh figs served in a perfectly calculated tidbit. As with the bacon and eggs salad, he uses a smattering of arugula sprouts and a lightly acidic zinfandel jus to cut the liver's richness and the jam's sugar. An equally deft display of balanced flavors is the crisped duck confit appetizer, which gets the traditional fruit cleansing, but a tarter layering than usual, from a cherry compote and a bold manchego cheese. Glazed shallots echo the light grassiness of the toss of baby spinach and unobtrusively clean the palate before the confit can save.

For all their complexity, Caputo's dishes are greater than the sum of their parts because he uses all the components — sides, garnishes and sauces — not as condiments but as elements of the whole. They're not necessarily “combined” the way ingredients used to be, but assembled and arranged so their unique qualities are as obvious as their complementary ones. The coriander-crust rockfish is really just dusted, not armored to the degree that it ruins your palate before you get to the flesh,



“Bacon and eggs” salad with truffle vinaigrette at Espuma in Rehoboth.

and its meatiness is emphasized by the breadth of flavors Caputo plays it against: earthy baby artichokes, gnocchi of potatoes and a shaving of prosciutto that echoes the fish's natural salinity without overwhelming it. (Even in that elegant company, the gnocchi made a distinct impression: Made from Robuchon potatoes, so named for the extraordinarily butter-rich version made popular by star chef Joel Robuchon, they are the downiest pillows imaginable.)

One of the best entrees also involves a raviolo: caramelized diver scallops over a black truffle- and mushroom-stuffed dumpling so smooth, rich and elegantly musty it is a meal in itself. The asparagus two ways — roasted and pressed into sauce — was another satisfying texture switch and against the scallops showed off their oddly gamy quality.

Slow-roasted wild salmon is allowed to speak for itself, although its simplicity comes as a pleasant surprise. Anise flavors are such familiar partners for salmon that the dish sounds predictable, but the restraint of the basil risotto and the shaved fennel garnish make clear how overdressed most salmon is. (Caputo gets most of his seafood from Browne Trading Co. in Portland, Maine, perhaps the most consistent first-quality wholesaler in the country.) The roast chicken breast — Why do restaurant critics eat so much roast chicken? Because so few chefs really get it right — gets a classic and vindictory treatment of sweet peas, mushrooms and house-made fazzoletti (“handkerchief” pasta, so called for its square shape).

Caputo describes his style as Mediterranean-inspired and California-influenced, but it's not so much “lightened” as it is clarified. A sausage and peppers appetizer is almost a sweet-pepper jam with red onions, slices of chorizo and a veil of melted Parmesan. The “Portuguese-style” mussels get a traditional kick from andouille, but the chickpea fritters look back to Iberia's long domination by

navies of the Middle East. Caputo's “neo-classic” paella is about as traditional as he gets (a mix of lobster and shellfish, chicken and chorizo, and kindly available for one as well as two) but escapes the weightiness of most over-boiled versions.

It's particularly nice to be able to praise Espuma because Caputo is a local boy, more or less: He grew up in Dover, Del., got a job at a restaurant in college and dumped his planned baseball career for the Culinary Institute of America. He has worked in such notable kitchens as the Lark Creek Inn outside San Francisco and Boston's Radius, and made his first real mark as executive chef of Philadelphia's Tangerine. Just before the last summer season, he bought Espuma and began fine-tuning his concept.

He recently finished renovating the dining room as well, and while it's more dramatic than previously, it has a somewhat heavier feel than the food. The deep monochromatic scheme — a sort of spice rack of carmines — is meant to transport the diner and obscure the traffic, but the framed wall panels look a little like niches from which paintings have been stolen, and the spot lighting targets the diners' faces rather than the tables or menus. (There is one striking painting in the hallway that leads to the restrooms, but it makes you only wish for more.)

Rehoboth's restaurant industry — the food scene along the entire Delmarva shore, in fact — has been getting smarter and more adventurous for several years now (though it still has an excessive fondness for fusion). Espuma is a mark of its maturity — intelligent, not overwhelming and a real pleasure as well.

### Espuma

Location: 28 Wilmington Ave., Rehoboth

Phone: 302-227-4199

Kitchen hours: Open Tuesday-Sunday 6-10:30

Prices: Appetizers \$7-\$17; entrees \$21-\$35

Wheelchair access: Good