Dining review: At The Durham, Andrea Reusing serves up a perfect game

HIGHLIGHTS
James Beard Award-winning chef applies locavore ethic to restaurant's seasonally evolving menu
No misses in a succession of dishes over the course of three meals
Exemplary dishes include a deviled crab souffle called 'The Buster' and 'a true connoisseur's steak'

As I’m sipping coffee at the end of my third visit to The Durham, I realize that I’ve just experienced the culinary equivalent of a perfect game in baseball.

The “pitcher” in this case is Andrea Reusing, James Beard Award-winning chef-proprietor of Lantern in Chapel Hill. Reusing built her reputation largely on her thoughtful melding of Asian flavors and North Carolina ingredients at that restaurant. But for her new venture – the restaurant at The Durham, a boutique hotel that opened last summer in downtown Durham – she’s applying her locavore ethic and considerable talent to a seasonally evolving menu inspired by American classics.
It’s a daring new direction, to be sure, but given Reusing’s proven versatility (her long-running Lantern Table dinner series has explored cuisines from all over the world), it should come as no surprise that she’s up to the challenge. Still, I’m not prepared for a succession of dishes over the course of three meals that never once misses the strike zone.

The first meal’s warmup pitch – thick slices of a crusty, rustically wheaty sourdough bread and soft, house-cultured butter – serves notice that this will be food without compromise or shortcuts.

Next comes the relish tray we’ve ordered: a rainbow assortment of fresh and pickled radishes, cauliflower, carrots and hickory-smoked pecans (not a single broken piece, mind you) — which in turn prime our palates for a baked-to-order deviled North Carolina deviled crab soufflé called The Buster. Named for the brief stage when molting crabs are on the verge of becoming soft shells (“busters,” according to crabber lingo, because they’re busting out of their shells), this is a dish as transcendental as it is ephemeral.

But it doesn’t upstage our main course, a bone-in dry-aged rib-eye steak. Featuring local grass-fed Red Poll beef (a breed that Reusing finds particularly well-suited to the combination of grass-finishinng and dry-aging) that’s aged a minimum of 60 days, expertly grilled and properly rested, this is a true connoisseur’s steak. Cut from the bone and reassembled on on a small bed of young leafy greens that are wilting in its hot juices, the steak is the star player in a stunning beefeater’s triple play that also includes a roasted marrow bone and a massive pile of textbook shoestring fries cooked in beef fat. Typically offered in weights ranging from 18-48 ounces and priced according to the market (our 24-ounce steak, ample for two to share, rings up at $66), it’s an extravagance. And you won’t regret a penny of it.

A sublime six-layer coconut cake dressed in silky meringue and ragged toasted coconut caps off the memorable meal.

A few weeks later, Sunday brunch keeps the winning streak alive. No need to replay every “ooh!” and “mmm!” uttered by our party of four. Here’s the highlight reel:
**Pastry board:** Brown sugar cardamom date scone, corn muffin with preserved local blueberries and a croissant-like buckwheat sugar cake so light it’s hard to believe it contains any buckwheat flour at all, much less 30 percent of the mix.

**Toast:** A molten blend of cheddar and Green Man Brewery porter on rustic wheat, grilled and served in a miniature cast iron skillet; crunchy seeded rye slathered with avocado, scallions, lemon and black pepper; and the consensus table favorite, smoked speckled sea trout with mustard seed and herbs on buttered Pullman toast.

**Scapple:** Reusing’s respectful nod to a Pennsylvania Dutch classic omits the liver for an unctuous, savory slab of pork terrine, fried to a crispy turn, topped with a sunny-side-up egg and served on a plate bejeweled with precisely diced pickled North Carolina apples.

**Hangtown fry:** Exemplary fried oysters (today’s are from Stump Sound, per our knowledgeable and enthusiastic server) and soft-scrambled egg, served over toast and a puddle of hot sauce butter, garnished with fried parsley and curlicues of bacon – which is so good, we throw caution to the wind and order a side order of ...

**Bacon:** Locally cured with the skin on and cooked in a precisely calibrated combination of low- and high-temperature cooking methods, yielding thick, gratifyingly chewy-crunchy slices with a crisp edge of crackling.

A single meal without a mishit is rare, in my experience, but two meals in a row are practically unheard of. I just have to see what would happen if the game went into extra innings, so I return to The Durham for a third visit.

This time, my wife and I arrive early for pre-dinner cocktails on the rooftop bar, where a large, boisterous crowd will prove to be the only thing to mar the night’s experience. The cocktails are first-rate, though, and it doesn’t seem fair to charge the home team with an error for fan interference.

We don’t have time before our reservations to sample from the rooftop menu that’s offered after 5 p.m. and includes a tantalizing raw bar display. Once we’re back downstairs and seated in the dining room, we console ourselves with oysters on the half shell: half of them briny Olde Salts from Virginia, half brinier Wellfleets from Massachusetts, all flawless. Beef tartare – a mix-it-yourself pastiche of minched raw beef, egg yolk, shallot, capers, mustard and sea salt – rounds out a first course that is the most convincing argument I’ve ever seen for the raw food diet lifestyle.
The entrees that follow – an expertly seared filet of North Carolina black bass over Carolina Gold rice and a court-bouillon-enriched Louisiana crawfish stew, and rosy-centered slices of roasted Moulard duck breast showered with shaved white truffle – maintain the stratospheric standard. So do shareable a la carte sides: barely wilted baby collards and spinach with toasted garlic and lemon; and a chile-dusted medley of charred sweet potatoes tossed with almonds in honey and cider vinegar.

Grasshopper sundae, starring the most quintessentially minty mint chocolate chip ice cream I’ve ever tasted, topped with vanilla marshmallows (house-made? need you ask?) and a decadent bittersweet dark chocolate sauce and served in a retro stainless steel sundae coupe – completes the three-meal gastronomic clean sweep.

Service is welcoming, attentive and well-trained – and if your waiter can’t answer all your questions about the restaurant’s excellent wine list, he doesn’t need to be prodded to find someone who can.

The Durham’s dining room is an airy, casually inviting space whose vibrant mid-century modern decor takes its cues from the former Home Savings Bank building, an iconic 1968 structure that has been restored to become home to the hotel.

Inspired by the hotel’s proximity to the Durham Performing Arts Center, Reusing recently introduced a pre-theater dinner menu, available Monday-Thursday from 5:30-6:30 p.m for $29. Though it’s targeted at the DPAC crowd, there’s no reason you couldn’t take advantage of the offer before a Durham Bulls night game. And if the Bulls’ pitching performance is on a par with that of Andrea Reusing and her crew, you’re really in for a special night.

THE DURHAM
315 E. Chapel Hill St., Durham; 919-768-8831
thedurham.com/dining
Cuisine: American
Rating: ★★★★☆
Prices: $$$-$$$$$
Atmosphere: casually inviting mid-century modern
Noise level: moderate to high
Service: welcoming and attentive
Recommended: take your pick, you can’t miss
Open: Dinner Monday-Saturday, brunch Sunday (continental breakfast served daily from the coffee shop/bar in the back)
Reservations: recommended
Other: full bar; accommodates children; good vegetarian selection; rooftop patio/bar; parking on street and in garage across the street.

The N&O's critic dines anonymously; the newspaper pays for all meals. We rank restaurants in five categories: ★★★★★ Extraordinary ★★★★ Excellent. ★★★ Above average. ★★Average. ★ Fair.

The dollar signs defined: $ Entrees average less than $10. $$ Entrees $11 to $16. $$$ Entrees $17 to $25. $$$$$ Entrees more than $25.