

# Culinary adventures with EC Tasting Gallery



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For The Baltimore Sun

OCTOBER 28, 2014, 4:01 PM

**O**n top of each tender mouthful of raw beef tenderloin, intricately seasoned with an extract of Navajo sumac berries and other spices, rested a smoked quail egg garnished with an edible radish flower.

The generous bite, wryly dubbed “Native-American steak and eggs,” arrived on a contemporary white spoon as the first of seven courses served at EC Tasting Gallery’s sixth pop-up dinner, an alfresco affair set up by the open bays of a backyard motorcycle garage-museum.

Dubbed “A Culinary American Road Trip” for its homage to the motorcycle and the diverse cuisines of the United States, the evening revved up patrons’ culinary imaginations and took their taste buds to “stops” across the country, paying tribute to the cuisines of New Mexico, New England, Florida, New Orleans, Oregon and Memphis.

Chefs Kevin Brothers and Colin Bickley concocted courses of sea urchin on croutons topped with lobster-lemon foam; squash blossoms filled with crab and apricot ricotta, resting on watermelon wedges in a sea of smoked tomato water; and barbecued pork shoulder with grilled peaches and blueberry candied greens served family style.

But the hush-hush arrangements are what elevate each of EC Tasting Gallery’s lavish spreads — termed “pop-up

dinners” because they are staged at various locations for one night only — into a unique and sought-after experience.

Between 20 and 60 guests eagerly pay \$100 to \$150 in advance, depending on the menu and location, to feast on foods prepared from a fixed, multicourse menu with wine pairings that they won’t see until they are seated.

They also agree to travel to an undisclosed destination that isn’t revealed until weeks after they sign up. On a recent midsummer evening, the venue turned out to be the Kings Contrivance home of Bob Henig, owner of Bob’s BMW in Jessup.

“The beauty of this is all the mystery,” observed diner Michael Silah of Ellicott City, who attended the limited-seating dinner with his wife, Mary Jo. “And when demand exceeds supply, people’s appetites grow — pun intended.”

Devin MacBride, who came with his wife, Jessica, and some friends, also acknowledged the intrigue surrounding the event.

“But as soon as you report on this in the magazine, it will be passé,” joked MacBride, who also lives in Ellicott City.

Fortunately, that isn’t the case. EC Tasting Gallery’s events sell out quickly — often within hours of being announced — and interest in attending has shown no signs of abating.

Since its debut in November 2013, EC Tasting Gallery has organized dinners about every other month. Some take place in Main Street restaurants like Pure Wine Cafe and Portalli’s, but the hope is to host more of them at exotic locales, like a museum, barn and train station.

The hallmark of these meals is the pairing of elaborate, seasonal dishes — such as torched scallop mousse, pumpkin paella and smoked wild boar sausage — with purees, foams and garnishes that are often unfamiliar but always enticing to adventurous palates.

MacBride says the meal exceeded his expectations, which were high.

“We had heard good things about this trend from the West Coast, and going into it we were really excited,” he says. “The food combinations were really inventive, and it was a great venue. We thought it was awesome.”

The chefs say they love eating and keeping up with culinary trends, and they say they’re gratified by their success convincing others to go along with them for the ride.

“It’s a trust that we’ve developed” with customers, Brothers says about the unusual concept.

“We’re pushing the boundaries,” Bickley adds, “even for foodie people.”

And while they love the underground nature of what they do, success may bring about changes: Brothers and Bickley are now considering ways to accommodate more people and incorporate visiting chefs.

Henig agreed to host a dinner with his wife, Suzanne, out of desperation, he told the amused crowd at his home on an unseasonably temperate July evening.

“This came to be because I couldn’t get into any of Kevin and Colin’s events,” he said to collective laughter after welcoming guests to the garage-museum he calls his “hobby run amok.”

Before the meal, guests toured Henig's display of new and vintage motorcycles, gawked at a motorized unicycle, sat in his 1938 Chevrolet Master and viewed motorcycle paraphernalia — all the while sampling a variety of wines selected by Brandon Thornton, a wine-and-spirit specialist in Catonsville.

Diner Destinee Montague swirled her glasses of wine with gusto and soaked up the detailed descriptions of each vintage offered by Thornton.

"I'm no expert, but I really appreciate white wines that are not sweet," said Montague, a resident of Historic Ellicott City who attended with her husband, Ben Thurston. "I know what I like, and these wines are delicious."

Exotic food arrived every half-hour or so until 9:30 p.m., each course a little grander and more filling than the last. The elongated pace of the meal, which lasted for six hours, was deemed "a luxury" by Mary Jo Silah and others who set aside the entire evening to enjoy eating and socializing.

As each plateful was set before them, many diners snapped smartphone photos to share with curious friends.

"I call this 'food porn,'" Henig said as he took a close-up shot.

After dessert (a salted caramel bourbon frozen custard) was finished around midnight, Brothers and Bickley finally made an appearance.

"People were clapping and bowing," Brothers says. "It was very humbling."

When the pair was introduced in 2012 at Ellicott City's Pure Wine Cafe, they immediately hit it off and decided they should "get behind a knife" and cook together, they say.

"There's a spark of energy when you're working with someone and you know what they're going to do before they do it," says Brothers, who was Pure Wine Cafe's chef for three years and graduated in 2006 from L'École de Cuisine (now the Pennsylvania School of Culinary Arts) in Lancaster, Pa.

When the new friends' menu for a pig roast last fall morphed into a complex multicourse meal for a lot of people, they came up with the idea of posting an invitation on social media and selling tickets to recoup some of their expenses. It proved an easy sell.

"We run with a very food-driven crowd," Brothers says.

Refining their idea further, Bickley suggested keeping the menu a secret until the dinner, inspired by restaurants where diners order based on the chef's recommendation.

As a pop-up dinner nears, the partners leap into action.

"We source the freshest and most exotic ingredients in advance," Brothers says.

"Then we start leaving hints on Facebook so people know there's going to be an announcement," Bickley says.

"When we're actually in gear, it's a full-time job — doing shopping, prep, décor — even though we both have careers," says Brothers, who is 29, engaged and a personal chef who gives private cooking lessons. "We live and breathe this stuff."

Bickley, 39, who is the married father of two young children and works on grassroots funding for political and environmental causes, acquired his cooking skills from observing and working with chef friends in Los Angeles,

where he lived before moving to Maryland two years ago.

“Baltimore is picking up on pop-up-dinners, and so is D.C.,” says Bickley. “Our clientele appreciates the food scene and how innovative it can be.”

So how does one prepare to consume such a large and sophisticated meal?

Brothers advises against conventional wisdom (eating less ahead of the meal to save room): “Be slightly gluttonous the day before” so that your stomach expands a bit, he says.

Bickley adds, “You won’t feel overly full afterward that way — just content.”

Amen.

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