



The new kid in town:

Trummer's on Main's chef brings a lot of ambition to the new venture

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Chef Clayton Miller at Trummer's on Main in Clifton. (Clayton Miller / Examiner)

With his fresh-scrubbed looks, executive chef Clayton Miller appears just like the eager freshman who has landed at the university for his first day of classes. He's eager, all right, because he has just started on the culinary journey of a lifetime: He has taken over the newly refurbished kitchen of the venerable -- and now defunct -- Hermitage Inn in Clifton. Renamed and extensively remodeled, the inn has morphed into Trummer's on Main, and has the swagger of the new kid in town.

For old-timers who remember the creaking wooden floors and straight-up stairway of the old inn, the changes may boggle the senses: Where is the staircase? The covered outdoor patio-garden? The aroma of old age? Not to worry: The interior and decor may sparkle with newness, but also Miller brings to the kitchen a sense of innovation that may jolt the senses. After all, he's got three different dining venues and a brand-new kitchen to play around with.

So who is this guy who has landed this plum job? A native of Pittsburgh and a graduate of the Pennsylvania Institute of Culinary Arts in Pittsburgh, Miller eased into this profession, not because he had learned the trade from his grandmother or that the career beckoned to him from his early days. It happened this way: As an undergraduate, Miller studied hotel management, and in the course of his studies, decided he should learn a bit about the kitchen side of hotel work. And culinary school was something of a revelation.

"I really got into it [cooking]," he says. "'Wow, I really like this' I thought. I really like going to work. It latched onto me. I count my blessing each day I go to work."

Miller has lucked into a series of jobs that have taken him into some mighty kitchens for work under some inspiring chefs. His first position at the Ritz-Carlton Company in Atlanta, a AAA five-diamond property, convinced him that even the daily grind of kitchen duties were fascinating. Besides, that led to his second position in a sister Ritz property, also in Atlanta, with acclaimed chef Guenter Seeger, who in a year's time earned the Dining Room several five-star ratings.

After Seeger left, Miller's new boss was a young and ambitious French chef named Joel Antunes.

"He was a great influence," says Miller. "It was his first job in the United States and he had a great background in modern French cooking. I learned a lot of new flavor profiles and combinations, butchering, and making sauces. Working for both chefs was a great arrangement."

But perhaps the best was yet to come: A year and a half stint at California's fabled the French Laundry with Thomas Keller and then a move to Orlando, Fla., to work with another culinary hot shot, Norman Van Aiken. There for five years, Miller did most of the cooking and much of the front-of-the-house duties at the Ritz-Carlton Orlando.

As it so happened, Miller was looking for his next move a few months ago just when the new owners of Trummer's were looking to fill the executive chef's spot. Luckily, at their first meeting chef applicant and restaurant owners clicked, and after several interviews, the job was Miller's.

Q&A with Chef Clayton Miller

What's your comfort food?

Aside from pork, it's Puerto Rican food. And a good burger, a good Buffalo wing. On my days off, I am simple.

What's your favorite dessert?

What pops into my mind are great fresh cookies, like chocolate chip with cinnamon. I like cookies right out of the oven. I don't like over-the-top desserts. I don't want people undoing their buttons at the end of dinner.

What is your cooking philosophy?

Don't screw it up. Cooking is all about execution. Recipes are recipes and two different people can turn them out differently. For me, it is execution during service, and I design dishes around that.

Which is your favorite cuisine?

Classic French and even country French. A good bistro. You can see that in my bar food, which is rustic country fare.

What's in your fridge?

If my girlfriend is not here, just beer, coffee and some vegetables. You might find an old bagel.

If you go: Trummer's on Main; 7134 Main St.; Clifton, Va.; 703-266-1623

Hours: Dinner 5 to 11 p.m. Monday-Saturday; lounge/bar area 5 p.m. to midnight Monday-Saturday; Sunday brunch and bar breakfast 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.

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From the Chef's Kitchen

Tomato Jam

Yield: 2 cups

4 pounds tomatoes
1/4 cup grated fresh ginger
2 cloves garlic
1 cup honey
1 cup sugar
1 cinnamon stick
1 star anise
1 tbsp. ground cumin
1/8 tsp. cayenne
1/8 tsp. nutmeg
1/2 cup red wine vinegar
1/4 cup white wine vinegar
3 tbsps. salt

Peel, seed and chop the tomatoes. Grate the ginger and the garlic. Combine all ingredients in a large saucepan, and cook over medium-low heat to reduce the mixture until thick. Transfer the jam to an air-tight container and refrigerate. When cooled and of semisolid jam consistency, jam is ready to be served.