

This restaurant in the Dupont Circle Hotel is cut from a different cloth



The lamb tagine at the Pembroke inside the Dupont Circle Hotel is served on saffron couscous with apricots, figs, preserved lemons and toasted almonds. (Deb Lindsey/For The Washington Post)

By **Tom Sietsema**

Food critic

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“There’s nothing good in Dupont Circle anymore,” an acquaintance who lives there told me earlier this year. He lamented the fact he could no longer walk out of his townhouse and into an interesting — as in different — place to eat, and I nodded as he relayed how the restaurant action in the city had shifted eastward and elsewhere in recent years.

On Valentine’s Day, I found myself at **the Pembroke** in the reimagined Dupont Circle Hotel, scrolling through my phone to find my former colleague’s contact. The neighborhood’s unlucky streak had been broken, with the help of a chef named Marlon Rambaran and designer Martin Brudnizki. Not only was I devouring one of the best tagines in recent memory, I was enjoying the Moroccan classic in the embrace of a blue velvet banquette, and attended by a server who introduced the dish as if he made it himself.

Rambaran, 39, is a Trinidad native who grew up in New Jersey and went on to learn the kitchen ropes in, among other restaurants, Scarpetta by Scott Conant in Miami Beach and Le Bec Fin in Philadelphia. Along with Karine Bakhoum of “Iron Chef” fame, Rambaran originally signed on to the project as a consultant. The Irish owner of the property, Bernadette Gallagher, was taken with his French-based, globally influenced ideas and asked him to command the kitchen.



Saffron risotto Milanese, topped with gold leaf. (Deb Lindsey/For The Washington Post)



Pembroke executive chef Marlon Rambaran. (Deb Lindsey/For The Washington Post)

Brudnizki, born in Sweden and based in both New York and London, is known worldwide for his timeless settings, including the Surf Club Restaurant in Miami and Park MGM in Las Vegas. Customers of the lounge, bar and dining room at the Dupont Circle Hotel are looking at \$5 million worth of eye candy. There's no part of the Pembroke, outfitted with leather bar stools and coral couches, and set off with floor-to-ceiling windows, that doesn't make for a fashion statement. Even the napkins feel better than most. The lone fail might be the small marble tables for two, better suited for an ice cream parlor than a full-fledged restaurant.

The bread basket might have to be removed to make way for the fluke crudo, but that's fine by me, because the raw fish is an edible still life arranged with bright bits of winter citrus that do a nice dance with fresh lime, olive oil and crackling fleur de sel.

Does every diner get a sheet of gold leaf the size of a cocktail napkin atop even a half portion of risotto, as I experienced? The generous garnish is impressive. So, too is the saffron-scented carnaroli rice, cooked to a fine creamy state with the help of chicken stock. An early best seller is a tender rope of grilled octopus, tweaked with chermoula, served with croquettes that split open to find purple potatoes. The lamb tagine calls to me most, however. Rambaran braises together neck, shank and shoulder, which end up on a bed of saffron-perfumed couscous set off with apricots, figs, preserved lemons and toasted almonds. Each bite goes down like a sumptuous banquet.



Saturday night diners in the bright, leather-accented dining room at the Pembroke. (Deb Lindsey/For The Washington Post)

Draws from the lunch menu include a chicken soup whose short noodles, diced bell peppers and big oval bowl separate it from the pack, and a tender chicken paillard painted with stripes of yogurt flecked with sumac and made green and racy with capers and cilantro. The entree comes with a choice of sides; herbed french fries best the candy-sweet baby carrots. Desserts hew to the tried and true. The Pembroke's apple galette, topped with crème fraîche, tastes European, admirably restrained in its sweetness.

The alluring setting seems to bring out the best in the vest-dressed staff, whether it's mixing a revivifying French 75 at the center bar or deftly filleting Dover sole at the table. Overheard conversation suggests the restaurant could become a neighborhood fixture. "I haven't been here since they remodeled," a diner near me says to his companion. "*Nice!*"

Rambaran likes to think of what he's cooking, subject to change with the seasons, as "not too trendy. In 20 years, we still want to be here."

He and the dining room are off to a smart start.

1500 New Hampshire Ave. NW. 202-448-4302. thepembrokedc.com. Dinner entrees, \$28 to \$96 (rib-eye for two with sides).

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