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REN MIKE MICHOT STEPS UP FOR THE
LAFAYETTE BUSINESS COMMUNITY

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SMALL
BIG

SMALL PLATES, BIG SPLASH

Ernest Hemingway went to Pamplona to see the running of the bulls and never got over his love affair with Spain. Diners who visit Lafayette's new downtown tapas restaurant of the same name are having the same experience. At first it seems a bit confusing. You order how many dishes? You only get vegetables if you want them? You can have duck and shrimp and oysters and foie gras and scallops and a haunch of roast piglet? And then suddenly the small plates, carefully crafted with food as lovely to look at as it is to eat, start coming in a rush, and you find yourself racing through an explosion of taste, elbowing your companions to get the last of the escargot, signaling with both hands for another bottle of Spanish Cava sparkling wine, fiercely guarding a spoonful of chocolate lava cake. When it's finally over, your relationship with food has been altered forever.

Diners conscious of health and waistlines or simply tired of huge platters of meat and potatoes have long found little nibbling in traditional restaurants by ordering a series of appetizer-sized items instead of the heinous entrée. The tapas approach to eating — an array of small portions of food with a high intensity of flavor — has swept through the restaurant world in the last five years. It's the way we know how to eat in Asian places, and now chef William Amesley is introducing Acadiana to eat like Spaniards, or better. The array of dishes with ingredients from all over the planet that Amesley gathers and lays out before dazed diners has dramatically raised the culinary bar in Lafayette.

Chef Amesley was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. "I grew up in a castle, with butlers and footmen," he says. Amesley is a descendant of the Earls of Arundel, members of the Irish peerage created in 1789; the family seat was Castlewellan in the County of Down. Amesley summered at another castle, New Abbey, in County Kildare, Ireland. The family owned two great houses of whiskey, the Scottish Haig and the Irish Jameson. "In Ireland, there was a massive full service kitchen, and I'd just love to sit in there and watch," says Amesley. English food has a bad rep, but for those privileged enough to own country estates where everything is freshly grown, it's quite a different story. "We had a six-acre vegetable garden, wonderful produce, greenhouse, and all our meat was raised and slaughtered there," he says. "And we had wonderful cooks — you get involved." Traveling the continent, he ate in all the finest restaurants in Europe. Then the money ran out. "I still wanted to eat that way," says Amesley, "so I started to cook."

At 19, he got a job working at the Thatched Tavern, an eating pub in Ascot. Under Chef Dobby King, the pub had had to be booked 10 days in advance. Two years later, for his 21st birthday, Amesley took off for a three-week vacation in America. "I blew every penny on the trip to California, and then I suddenly realized I didn't have the money to move on. I had enough money to buy a motorcycle," he says, laughing. He got a job building movie sets in Los Angeles, quickly moving up to art director and movie producer. "All the time I was a box crew," he says. "I kept leaving these dinner parties, legendary dinner parties. Then one day I decided I was fed up with the commercial video world, so I turned around and started changing for the diners. I got a couple of runs down — the biggest was Bryan Lourd [of Creative Artists Agency]. After preparing a Thanksgiving lunch for Lourd and his then-girlfriend Carrie Fisher, word spread fast. Amesley cooked for Kiefer Sutherland and Owen Wilson and generated a huge amount of buzz when he opened Tanager restaurant on Hollywood Boulevard. The money-hoarding pre-Oscar parties and was patronized by everybody from Gwyneth Paltrow to Leonardo DiCaprio. "It was a riot," says Amesley. "That place nearly killed me."

He went on to open another restaurant with a North African theme, Oasis, which garnered rave reviews from LA Weekly, Globe and Mail Traveler, The Los Angeles Times, London Times and The New York Times. Meanwhile Amesley hooked up with director Quentin Tarantino's assistant, Karina Carreno, in 1996. They married in 2003, and Tarantino gave away the bride.

A native of Monaca, Carreno grew up in the Hub City, graduating from Lafayette High. Amesley had visited Lafayette several times, but after a trip south in 2004



DUCK CONFIT WITH SEVILLE ORANGES

the couple decided to put down roots in Cajun country. "I saw what was going on downtown," he says. "At first I looked at a building across the street from Dreyer's. But it was hard to get investment. Doves here it didn't matter that I'd been written up by The New York Times." The old Church's Toy-boys building was up for rent, and the second time was the charm. Pamplona, four years in the making, opened three months ago.

Amesley brings his world view of food to Lafayette's tables. Indian curry splices his chicken salad. That coconut milk sweetens mussel poaching broth. Hard-made panini bring a bit of Italy to the menu, and the disfigured steak with a chianina snout hole from Argentina. The menu could be described as fusion tapas. "Actually," says Amesley, "it's everything I like to eat."

Take his Duck Fat Fries for example. French fries are ubiquitous and simple. But Amesley changed the grease the potatoes are fried in to duck fat, which he fries in from the Hudson Valley along with his foie gras and ducks, ensuring his fries are extra crispy, then tops the ante with a sprinkling of sea salt, fresh garlic and parsley. In a nice play on Amesley's British fish-and-chips heritage, the fries are served in a special metal cone lined with a rictus of paper. And they're seasonal.

The upper third of the menu offers traditional montaditos, the kind of small bites offered along with a glass of sherry or wine in bars all over Spain. There are olives, chicken with quince, Serrano ham, baby sole with garlicky seed tomatoes on toast and small dipping in oil and garlic — the Spanish equivalent of nuts and chips.

The next menu section is labeled simply tapas, but takes you from the shores of the Mediterranean with grilled fresh sardines, to the jungles of east Asia where Amesley learned how to make the softest cocacore tooth to use to poach his muscle. There are sauces one can only define as Moroccan — a melding of Spanish and North African, like the rose petal dipping sauce that comes with the Pork Kababs. Amesley fines quince paste, a Spanish standby usually served with Manchego cheese, with sherry, lemon, garlic, and salt and rose water, the fragrance of the Alhambra. He's taken a friendly poke at a Cajun breakfast, offering Morcilla, a traditional Spanish black blood, which he fries and then tops with a tiny perfect fried quail egg. The second best salad with goat cheese dates everything you've ever thought about beef. These are like eating fresh nibbles. Duck confit is an ingredient often used in the clas-



SARDINE MONTADILLO



CHEF AMESLEY SERVES SOCKLING PIG ON THE WEEKENDS

sic French bean dish, cascabel. Here, Amesley serves the fork-tender preserved duck set off by fresh oranges, a nice play on texture as well as a nod to the classic pairing of duck and orange.

"Lafayette is a tough place to convince people about new food," Amesley says. He and Karina flare those wicks of dinner parties before the restaurant opened to his residents rate his tapas.

Dressed in restaurant whites that are usually smeared with a sampling of whatever he has been preparing, the 41-year-old chef gets loud, animated and joyous as he describes his vision. "What I like about Lafayette is that people understand quality," he says. "They're very opinionated about new food, but when they put something good in their mouths, they get it."

Food of this caliber can be pricey. "Look at it this way," Amesley says. "My meat comes from Chicago. Farm grass and ducks from New York. Chosen, ham fly from Spain. The fresh sardines come from Portugal." And then there is the local gathering of all things good. Veal from Bookshire Farms in Abbeville, Shrimp from Delcambre or Intercontinental City. He goes to Cotnam Family Farms for eggs, and tilapia and dairy products arrive from Smith Creamery in Thion Rouge. One member of the Pamplona staff's sole task is to drive around buying local fare. "I'm paying double what I could pay if I was buying national brands, but quality is quality is quality," Amesley reiterates.

It takes a great degree of skill to make food seem so effortless. Every dish is cooked to order in a kitchen dominated by European talent. Sous chef Sergio Iguerru (formerly cooked under Catalan superstar Ferran Adrià, owner of El Bulli near Barcelona, and also worked under French three-star chef Alain Ducasse. Chef de cuisine Orlando Amato comes to Pamplona after stints at renowned restaurant Atrac in San Sebastián, Spain, and Santa Maria in Barcelona. The fireproof in the kitchen combined with the highest quality seasonal food allows Amesley to serve such deceptively simple dishes. "I see Pamplona as a destination of the food circuit, a place that wins Michelin stars," says Amesley. "I intend for this to be one of the great restaurants of the world." ■

CHEF WILLIAM AMESLEY ENVISIONS HIS GRAND-BREAKING NEW DOWNTOWN RESTAURANT PAMPLONA AS AN INTERNATIONAL DINING DESTINATION. BY MARY TUTWILER

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