



Pollo en Mole Poblano—chicken in classic Mexican black mole made from six types of dried chiles and chocolate. Garnishes are crumbled queso fresco and toasted pepitas. On top is curtido, a slaw of cabbage, carrots, oregano and red pepper flakes. Below, Matthews gathers heirloom tomatoes at the local farmers' market.

# Bird Eggs & Blogs

**CHRISTINA BALL follows a blog trail to a back alley in Old Town Winchester, where chef Ed Matthews does a lot more than muse about the wonders of food at his destination-worthy restaurant, One Block West.**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TYLER DARDEN

**Eager to explore the dining possibilities of Virginia's apple capital,** I began an Internet-led investigation of restaurants in Winchester. I found a few restaurant websites, with their sample menus, photo galleries and reviews, but one spot in particular intrigued me. It was the meticulously managed site for One Block West, a six-year-old restaurant owned and operated by self-taught chef Ed Matthews. The online menu made my mouth water and gave me a sense of the restaurant's culinary blueprint—seasonal, yet also as personal as a fingerprint. But it was the chef's blog that stood out. It offered not only a behind-the-scenes preview of One Block West, but also a peek at the mind behind the restaurant.

Just a year old, Matthews' cleverly named *One Blog West* overflows with his entertaining and educational views on everything from recipes (watermelon salad, veal brisket with Vietnamese spices) to cooking techniques (how to prep soft shell crabs, preserve a lemon, cut a pineapple) to encyclopedic lessons on unusual or beloved ingredients (bird egg beans, porcini mushrooms, wineberries, karela squash).

But the posts that most interested me were the ones in which Matthews shares his own food and restaurant-related musings—and rants. In one revealing entry from the summer, he uses improv jazz and butterflies to help explain precisely why he *hates* writing recipes: "Writing a recipe is like taking a photograph of a beautiful butterfly in flight," Matthews writes. "You end up with a snapshot of a gorgeous, ephemeral creature, but in no way can you capture the essential beauty of its flight." Like the light flight of the butterfly or the infinitely variable saxophone playing of Charlie Parker, Matthews perceives cooking and meal preparation as a creative process that reflects his moods, emotions, whims—and, more practically, is a function of the ingredients available at the farmers' market that day. The recipe provides the framework, but the muse adds the magic.

I've met chefs who paint, chefs who garden, chefs who fish and many chefs who've published cookbooks. But Ed Matthews is the first Virginia-based chef I've discovered who finds—or *makes*—the time to reflect on the cooking process and to interact with diners through the Internet and the written word. In addition to giving readers a snapshot of life in a restaurant kitchen, the blog also gently reminds us of the importance of dining room etiquette. In one anecdote, Matthews recalls a group of lunching women who, for 20 minutes after being seated, chatted enthusiastically among themselves, menus open, with little apparent interest in food. Then, suddenly, one of



them impatiently asked a server when someone would take their order. The chef's reaction: "First, we do our utmost not to interrupt a conversation; that's just rude. Second, we look for some sign that you are ready to order. The surest sign is when everyone at the table has a closed menu. ..."

The time had come to meet the man, taste his food and experience his restaurant. On a lazy Friday afternoon in early August, at the peak of tomato season, I made a dinner reservation at One Block West and hit the road, hungry. By the time I got to historic downtown Winchester, I had an hour to stroll the quiet, tree-lined streets with their antique shops, cafes, bed-and-breakfasts, and more than a few true architectural gems, possibly awaiting a fresh purpose. Like a smaller version of Charlottesville, Winchester seems to be a little city on the rise, still clinging to its agricultural past as it moves toward a future strong in small business, medicine and tourism.

As its name suggests, One Block West is tucked away in a quiet alley one block west of the town's pedestrian mall with its many easier-to-spot restaurants. I was escorted to my seat in a corner of the coolly elegant dining room—cranberry-painted walls, exposed brick, burgundy tablecloths, windows looking out onto the rose-covered dining terrace. At 6:30, the 20-odd tables were nearly filled with couples of all ages, a few families with teenaged children, and a birthday gathering or two. A husband and wife in their 60s sat across from me, and I could tell by the questions they posed to our knowledgeable server—Where does the restaurant obtain its lamb? Which grape is most similar to the Chambourcin? When can we meet the chef?—that they *knew* food and wine.

I was already enjoying my first appetizer, a house-made veal and morel terrine, when Matthews emerged from the kitchen. Tall and broad-shouldered in a white chef's jacket, his thick, graying hair, wire-rimmed glasses and serious expression made him look like a cross between a football coach and a professor. "We get your newsletter and we love your blog!" the couple exclaimed while shaking Ed's hand. Later, I learned that the pair teaches cooking classes in D.C. and came to Winchester, like many in the know, primarily to dine at One Block West.

From his writings, which are relaxed and witty and have a casual authority, I had expected Matthews to be more effusive in person. But then I remembered that, before following his passion and becoming a restaurateur, Matthews had majored in French

at the University of Virginia (he's a Charlottesville native) and subsequently worked for 20 years in the technology field—thus his blog proficiency.

Attempting to pace myself, I managed to devour not only the creamy terrine studded with bites of delicately earthy morel mushrooms, salty bacon and whole green peppercorns, but also the plump capers and blackberries decorating my plate—both of which made me pucker with pleasure. Sips of White Hall's cool, fragrant Viognier cleansed my palate for the next starter, a towering celebration of the tomato in multiple forms. A bright and juicy salsa of fresh cherry tomatoes, scallions and hot green peppers was layered between three silver dollar-sized medallions of crispy-tender fried green tomato. It was like eating summer at its best.

Even though the seasonal, carefully crafted dinner menu was limited to eight entrée selections—jumbo lump crab cakes, jerked mahi-mahi, napoleon of fresh corn and tomatoes, grilled grass-fed filet mignon with port-porcini sauce and blue cheese, among them—I still had a tough time choosing. I decided to try two. A thin, deeply pink filet of Coho salmon came encrusted with pepper in a shallow pool of smoked salmon cream. "I use three pounds of smoked salmon to make that sauce," the chef told me as he walked by. Moist, firm fish, crisp peppery crust and creamy sauce: The combination of textures and flavors was incredibly complex for such a simple dish. Baby bok choy provided a fresh, green contrast to this play on pink.

A similarly well-conceived balance of ingredients, flavors and textures came next and was my favorite dish of the night: grilled local lamb loin chops topped with vivid green spinach sitting on a nest of local bird egg beans. A meaty, buttery, intoxicating blend of juices stained the well of the white plate. The chef's wine pairing for this dish, a glass of robust Chateauf-neuf-du-Pape from La Bastide, was spot-on and delicious.

Bird egg beans! I love legumes, but never have I enjoyed a bean so much. Similar to the raspberry red and white Italian *borlotta* bean (hugely popular in Rome and the soul of dishes like *pasta e fagioli*), these Virginia-grown beans are rounder (thus the name) and have a rich, almost meaty flavor. Matthews buys them



**From left: Pimontón-cruste amberjack with garden tomato coulis and a fan of local yellow squash. Garnishes are herb oil, local microgreens, local Thai basil bloom and local micro marigolds; the dining room.**

fresh, shells them and simmers them for 45 minutes with some onion, garlic, poblano chile and diced bacon. When an order is placed, he reduces the beans and a ladleful of juice in a sauté pan and finishes with a dab of butter. "There's a reason why you don't see these beans in most restaurants," the chef told me after explaining the lengthy process. Clearly few corners are cut at this restaurant, and you can taste the quality.

In the candlelight (it was now past 10:00), I opted to order dessert. Spoonfuls of Matthews' good peach and blackberry crumble with vanilla ice cream were wonderfully indulgent. I contemplated the simple

beauty of this summer meal, hoping the flavors would linger.

Before heading back home, I met Matthews early the next morning for coffee and a trip to the local Farmer's Market. When I asked him why he writes a blog, his answer was simple: "My customers requested it." But in talking more, I could tell he loved the extra interaction it provides with his diners; the blog is a chance to teach, share ideas and reflect on his personal philosophy. "Basically, I just want to have fun," he said, in all seriousness. I suppose that's why he left his Northern Virginia technology job six years ago to follow his dream of owning a restaurant in a small town, cooking the food he intuitively knew he was born to cook and working 14 hours a day, six days a week.

After two cups of coffee, it was time to hit the market. Just a few blocks from the restaurant, the Freight Station Farmers' Market sells the fruits and vegetables of 43-acre Mayfair Farm in nearby Bunker Hill, owned by Beth and Eugene Novak. Accustomed to Charlottesville's crowded City Market, I found Winchester's market—two trucks and five or six tables of summer bounty—a pleasant change. After greeting Beth with a quiet nod and a good morning, Matthews grabbed a few bags and started filling them with slender yellow squashes and Japanese eggplants ("I may fan-slice and grill them"), a few handfuls of colorful bird egg beans ("I only have two servings of lamb left") and apples. He added a few bunches of red beets and a pint of blackberries to his pile, and his morning shopping was complete. "This is just my ammunition," he told me. "When I get into the kitchen I'll figure out exactly what to do with it."

"We'll have leeks next week!" Beth exclaimed to the chef as we were leaving, loaded with bags. He contemplated a few possible ways to cook them, excited in his own way. A few minutes later, I loaded my car with tomatoes and peaches, leaving Chef Ed Matthews to his kitchen magic—and to his entertaining online musings. ●

**ONE BLOCK WEST**  
Ed Matthews, owner and chef  
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Winchester, VA 22601  
540.662.1455  
OBWRestaurant.com

#### ALSO WORTH A TASTE

**BREWBAKER'S**  
540.535.0111  
This locally owned pub features upscale bar food with items like "swamp" cheese dip and Caribbean jerk nachos.

**VIOLINO RISTORANTE ITALIANO**  
540.667.8006  
Best local Italian. Franco Stocco and his family, from the northern Italian region of Friuli, own the restaurant. The menu combines both classic and Northern Italian influences.

**LA NICOISE**  
540.723.8805  
Tucked behind Winchester's Old Town outdoor walking mall, this restaurant is worth the short walk and features fresh, authentic French and Mediterranean cuisine.