



DINING

Easy Bake to Executive

An exceptional dining experience should peak—not plateau—with dessert. CHRISTINA BALL discovers two young pastry chefs who hit this culinary high note with perfect pitch.

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After two years at the top-notch Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York, this young chef further honed her skills as a line cook at the busy Aqua in San Francisco (her version of boot camp) and eventually found her way back to the hills of Virginia and the pastry kitchen of the Inn at Little Washington. But when Marago – the

Inn's executive sous chef for four years – left this prime post to forge new culinary paths at Foti's last year, Ortner, together with several other key staff members, went with him. And it's a sweet thing she did, because this chef pairing is a match made in restaurant heaven.

Maragos compares his collaboration with Ortner to a terrific tennis game. "We hit ideas back and forth, and it works because we share the same mentality about food," he says. "We both like to let you taste all the layers of flavor in a dish without masking them."

True to its name (Foti's is short for the Greek *foteos*, which means *to bring something new to light*) this elegant restaurant located in a renovated building in Culpeper's awakening downtown lifts familiar foods to new heights. Exposed brick walls, a pressed-tin ceiling, hardwood floors and a flowing fireplace set the scene for Foti's creative, memory-evoking take on American and Mediterranean comfort cuisine. Maragos' fried egg sandwich – layers of salty Virginia ham, baby arugula and a shaving of Parmesan cheese on garlic ciabatta – starts you off with a strikingly simple, sunny-side-up smile. Even more seductive is his cedar-roasted brie topped with glistening olives and sun dried tomatoes – my nose took the first bite, the fragrance was so intoxicating and complex. A New Englander by birth, I grew up on Maine lobsters. But this chef's take on the colorful crustacean – a vanilla-roasted tail and claw served with two pillowy 'jonny cakes' in a syrup-reminiscent chardonnay butter sauce – took me somewhere only vaguely, dreamily familiar.

Cuisine like this would plateau without an equally memorable dessert course. But when Maragos serves, Ortner hits back, and the result is a culinary crescendo. Her seasonally changing dessert menu is just what it should be – surprising, short and not-too-sweet. Her chocolate mousse tower is an essay in flavor and texture contrast and harmony – a creamy trio of layered white, milk and dark chocolate mousse sits atop a thing round of hazelnut shortbread spotted with crunchy roasted cocoa beans. I mentally bowed to this young priestess of pastry when I followed a mouthful of high-quality chocolate with an unexpected bite of cleansing candied orange peel. In another smooth move, Ortner translates a classic comfort dessert – coconut cream pie – into a tart. With the same pleasure I experienced biting into Maragos' fried egg yolk, I poked my fork into the buttery tart shell and watched as the creamy filling, topped with a few thin caramelized banana slices and toasted coconut shavings, oozed out. I could actually taste Ortner's hand whipping the cream, rolling out the dough, and making the single chocolate-filled macaroon she carefully placed on the plate.

Which is just what she intended. "When you love what you do, people can taste it," she says. "If you can take a simple classic like an apple crumb cake and make people really enjoy it, it's because you care."

Instead of flamboyant, sugary oohs and ahhs, could it be that the secret to a great dessert lies in the simple, subtle details? Could this be the reason why so many women – notorious perfectionists, they say – excel in the pastry kitchen? When describing what she enjoys most about her work, Ortner points to the minute and the mysterious. "I love the intricate work, the repetition, the nuances of texture and temperature. When you get it right, it's like a perfect golf swing." Maragos bounces back with his own theory about women and pastry: "For guys, cooking is more about the fire and the speed. Women have a more seasoned palate, which lends itself to pastry. Plus, women will usually take that extra second to measure."