



Morgan's American Grill

New Market Sizzle

Smart décor, inventive menu, warm hospitality, and a surprise location combine to make Morgan's American Grill that rarest of finds.

Illusionist David Copperfield appears to have schooled owner-manager Shannon Blackway in the tricks of the trade. One moment you're swinging open a door in New Market, the next you're entering a hip corner restaurant in Bethesda or Dupont Circle. But if the Las Vegas showman is all razzle-dazzle, the magic at Morgan's American Grill is the real deal.

Before Blackway took the helm in May 2006, you could have practically waltzed in, grabbed any table you liked, and conducted echo-chamber tests for NASA. Last year's rumor that Morgan's was slip-sliding into bankruptcy couldn't be more wrong today. Chef Billy Fagan and Sous Chef Brandon Thamarus are headlining some terrific dishes and people are responding en masse. Getting a table—especially on weekends—often means queuing up out the door with folks from around the tri-state area.

BY MATTHEW ROBB
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN KEITH



A warm interior with contemporary touches—maize and terra cotta walls—greet a sophisticated crowd of diners. Owner Shannon Blackway (below, standing) and manager, Bobbi Krouse, greet a steady flow of guests throughout the week.

Blackway calls Morgan's American Grill "the future of dining in Frederick County." Judging by the excellent food—and customer gridlock—we agree. A congested parking lot speaks of happy customers and yes, reservations are gladly accepted.

Today, customers arriving at Morgan's American Grill are greeted by trendy maize and terra cotta walls accented by the watercolors and oils of New Orleans artists. Twin fireplaces capped by stacked-stone mantels ward off December's chill. The bar's semi-urban vibe channels more of that Copperfield magic, making you feel

you're anywhere but at a New Market strip mall. Blackway's concept is to offer customers a "true night on the town with unique combinations of fanciful, down-home cooking." Other independent restaurateurs should take note.

Blackway offers lots of nice touches. Meals are plated on contemporary English china. Coffee is served in a "Titanic cup," so named for its heft and sharply angled bottom. Several dishes arrive in asymmetric "moon bowls," which ace the presentation test. A glance at the restaurant's refinements, layout, and menu makes



Freshly caught seafood—provided by local Trout Seafood—is a constant on the menu, while more exotic fare such as elk, bison, and boar grace the menu each week.



Chef Fagan's ostrich kabob is among the top-selling "features" at Morgan's American Grill.

evident that this hip, little restaurant isn't so much a happy coincidence as a prototype for future franchises. Instead of discounting the possibility, Blackway winks and smiles.

Chef Fagan's menu showcases a mix of seafood and steakhouse classics, plus several inviting off-road temptations. Seafood—the marquee menu item—is just-caught fresh, courtesy of nearby Trout Seafood. The kitchen serves up two fish entrees every night, from salmon, tuna, flounder, and Chilean sea bass. The crabmeat laced throughout your homemade soup is jumbo lump, not backfin. The kitchen cuts its

own meats and makes its own salad dressings and desserts.

Among the standout starters—all priced under \$10—are the crispy fried coconut shrimp, oysters Rockefeller, fried brie, and a good warm crab dip.

Moving on to the main event, traditionalists will find the de rigueur New York strip, surf & turf (petite filet mignon or 16 oz. New York strip, with broiled 4 oz. lobster tail), Chesapeake tournedos (topped with crabmeat, asparagus and Béarnaise), barbeque ribs, chicken parmesan, and stuffed flounder. Prices range from the mid teens to the high twenties, but



Raspberry bread pudding

typically include a house salad, starch, and veggie. Pasta dishes come with a house salad.

Weekend nights find Fagan and Thamarus working their own magic. Among the recent features here slow-roasted prime rib and regional cuisines from Jamaica, Thailand, and Australia. The menu offers plenty of choices for the adventurous.

Wild game is a house favorite. On the Friday evening we visited,

I grabbed the last of the ostrich. I've dined on elk, bison, and boar, but grilled ostrich—served kabob style in a moon bowl—is a flavorful cross between mild venison and beef. The grilled ostrich whet my appetite for pan-seared emu. Other nights, you might find elk (a popular menu item), wild boar, bison, red deer, quail, duck, and yes, even alligator.

Tuesday night is Rajun Cajun Crab night, where a single crab cake dinner

can be yours for \$14.95. “Wild Wednesday” features stuffed flounder and “Thank Goodness it’s Thursday” a 12-ounce prime rib. The price both nights is \$15.95. Local musicians provide free entertainment on rotating Wednesdays and Fridays.

Hard to believe, but Blackway—who long ago began as a pastry chef—still makes all the desserts. The bread puddings are excellent, and the chocolate mousse, seasonal cheesecakes, and



upside apple-walnut pie all merit a hearty fork up. Sugarless desserts are available—and good.

“If we had 75 extra seats, we could fill them all,” Blackway says, as she eyes a line of customers. Not one to gather moss, she is currently expanding her “wine dinner” offerings and toying with the idea of occasional “beer dinners.” Two adjoining banquet rooms allow privacy for special occasions while keeping things cozy elsewhere. That said, a booming weekend night finds it fairly noisy inside.

Good news or bad, the chains and franchises will soon be banging at the door. For now, Morgan’s American Grill is a fine perk of New Market life—and a welcome respite from the ongoing hubbub. ✦

MORGAN’S AMERICAN GRILL
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11717 OLD NATIONAL PIKE
NEW MARKET

SMOKING: YES
RESERVATIONS ACCEPTED: YES