

Tilghman Island Inn

A waterfront destination | *Fran Severn*

Tilghman Island is about as remote a spot as one can find on the Eastern Shore. Home for generations to watermen, the air on Tilghman Island is scented with salt and crab. Driveways are made of oyster shells; red wing blackbirds perch in stands of cattails.

At the juncture of Knapps Narrows and the Bay sits Tilghman Island Inn. While you can get to the restaurant by car, it's also a destination for boaters. An hour under power from Annapolis, half that from Deale. To arrive solely by sail power can take anywhere from 2 hours to 3 days, according to executive chef and innkeeper, David McCallum. Boaters tie up at one of the 23 slips by the restaurant's outdoor bar and dining patio.

During his long career as a biomedical consultant, McCallum traveled frequently to Paris. He always planned a layover when he arrived to recover from jet lag. "I'd take a drive in the French countryside and the pavement changes to gravel, then clay, and about the time I think 'I'm lost,' there's this beautiful chateau with an excellent restaurant."

That was the inspiration for the Tilghman Island Inn. Since its opening in 1989, the 20-room inn and restaurant overlooking the Chesapeake Bay has garnered accolades for the ambiance of its lodgings and the quality of its kitchen and wine cellar.

Dining is an experience in relaxed elegance. Summer's lunch is on the patio beside the Narrows and the expanse of

wetlands beyond. McCallum's close relationship with Lisa Raymond of Dogwood Farms, 2003 National Small Farmer of the Year, guarantees fresh, organic produce is on his menus. There are few finer ways to spend an afternoon than enjoying a chef's omelet, made with asparagus picked that morning and served with a glass of crisp Chardonnay, while the occasional workboat putters its way back up the Narrows to its berth in Dogwood Harbor.

Originally McCallum and his late partner, Jack Redmon, didn't intend the inn to be the 20-year labor of love it turned into.

"We planned the inn to be a five-year passive investment. We'd hire an on-site manager and just come down on weekends." After rejecting properties in Pennsylvania and Chestertown, they checked out the property on Tilghman Island. At best, it was a diamond in the rough.

"It was a drive-up motel with a metal awning over the entrance, brown hemp carpet in the dining room, and a dance floor in the middle of it. But one look at the view and we said, 'This is it.' We can always change the building, but not the view. It would not change in a lifetime. That's what makes the place."

McCallum's path from biomedicine to kitchen was gradual, although, like



many chefs, his childhood was spent in the kitchen.

"My nanny was also the cook, so the family story is that my first toy was a ball of biscuit dough," he explains. Graduating from college with a degree in chemical engineering, he landed a job with Proctor and Gamble, doing things like formulating cake mixes. "I could have had a good corporate career,



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Bittersweet chocolate cake, raspberry ice cream, and chocolate ganache

but I was 26 years old and wanted to do something more meaningful with my life.”

Now McCallum oversees a kitchen with an executive sous chef trained at the New England Culinary Institute and a sous chef from the Culinary Institute of America. They draw on classic traditions, seasonal ingredients, and local sourcing for their menus, which change almost weekly.

“Classic tastes are classic for a reason. Cultural traditions have been tested over time: American, Italian, Eastern Shore, Low Country, Cajun, Creole,” he says. “My philosophy is not to move too far away from classic dishes, but to find some little twist at the end that will make it new and fresh.”

Seasonal and local are part of McCallum’s DNA. “I was into this locovore thing before it was popular. I was raised on a farm and was ‘forced’ into

local, seasonal foods. We butchered hogs and chickens, ate what we raised on the farm. That makes you grow up with a different philosophy about food.”

In the evening, diners take tables by the huge windows with their unobstructed views of the lingering twilight over the Bay. This is when McCallum’s talent for giving traditional dishes a personal twist shines. Black-eyed peas are elevated to gourmet status as pea cakes dressed with a Jerusalem artichoke dressing. The quality of the Chesapeake’s nascent cultivated oyster industry is confirmed with a half-dozen “Choptank Sweets” on the half shell, accompanied with a mignonette sauce. Simple pan-seared rockfish gets a Southern accent when it’s served with Parmesan polenta (aka grits), while the selection of vegetables over penne pasta changes almost daily. The only

constant is the fresh basil used for the pesto cream sauce.

With a wine list that consistently wins accolades from *Wine Spectator* magazine and a well-versed staff, it’s impossible not to find the perfect accompaniment for the meal, in this case a Sauvignon Blanc from California’s Central Coast. David can’t point to the tree where the grapefruit used in the freshly made sorbet was picked, but that’s about the only concession to non-local sourcing he makes.

After 23 years, McCallum still finds his role as innkeeper and chef a thrill.

“It’s the most relaxing thing I so. I don’t understand how people can get up and go to work in the morning if they don’t love what they do. Cooking is something you do because you love it. It’s recreation for me. It’s a lot of fun to run a good restaurant.” **T**