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By ALISON COOK

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The halibut is bronzed to a crisp and accompanied by morels and peas.

Nick de la Torre Chronicle

The rectangle of foie gras on my plate at 17 had the daring texture of buttercream and precise garnishes that made the terrine dance: narrow batons of pickled rhubarb, triangles of marinated strawberry, a half-dozen artful dots of aged balsamic vinegar, as thick and intense as syrup.

It was as disciplined and immaculate a dish as I have seen since the work of Robert Gadsby when he was at Noé, in the Omni Hotel. So were the five other small plates on that evening's tasting menu, a sample of the accomplished work being done by 17's new chef, Wes Morton.

Augmenting Morton's skills are the inspired wine pairings of the restaurant's new sommelier, Evan

Turner, who startled me by pouring a taste of McPherson's West Texas Viognier to go with that elegant foie gras — and who startled me even more by being right.

One thing I admire about Morton's skills is that while he clearly has a yen for salt, he is capable of pushing the ingredient tantalizingly close to the edge of excess — as in the foie gras terrine — but no further. Well, mostly: Over four visits, I found only two dishes saltier than I would have liked.

One such dish was an otherwise exemplary piece of well-braised Berkshire pork in a red-wine reduction of pan juices, the meat sharply accented with fresh marjoram. The other, from the lunch menu, was a fascinating duck confit salad — a species of sublime hash lightened by curly wisps of endive, the richness of soft duck and crisp skin cut by a discreet gloss of cider vinaigrette. On top sat a mellow poached duck egg with a runny, deep-gold yolk. I worked my way through this salad with great delight until I ran out of endive and the salt kicked in. Another small handful of greens would have restored the balance.

I have enjoyed nearly everything I've tasted on Morton's new menus. His amuses-bouches, the tiny mouthfuls that come as complimentary warm-ups to a meal, can captivate — from a local baby beet dressed with lemon oil and microgreens to a satiny oval of head-spinning chicken-liver mousse capped with chives.

Even a simple tasting portion of heirloom tomato salad, beautifully turned and prepped, came to

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life with a twinge of lemon oil, a satiny blob of Burrata cheese and a scatter of local arugula leaves so young and tender and tangy that I devoured every shred. With the dish, Turner poured a 2006 Gysler Halbtrocken German Silvaner that overcame my mistrust of sweetish wines and proved an exciting contrast to the acidic tomatoes.

The pairing shocked me out of complacency; no diner can ask for more. Turner is one of a handful of elite sommeliers in town who deserves your absolute trust. He's such a good fit with Morton that the six-course nightly tasting menu, \$130 with wine pairings (\$85 without), is a worthwhile investment.

Along with that tender pork — matched with a surprising, Rhône-like 2006 Lagniappe Syrah from Gramercy Cellars in Washington — the tasting might produce a pearly mini-slab of halibut, bronzed to a crisp, escorted by scallionlike pickled ramps, crisp-seared whole morels with a gnarly forest look and little green peas. Turner's lovely match? A 2005 Gravitus Reserve Chardonnay from New Zealand, reminiscent of a good Meursault.

Morton seems to be a good self-editor. His spring menu is small, just eight appetizers, 10 entrées and three grilled steaks (it is in a hotel, after all). He has such a nice feel for local farm products that I wish he allowed himself more than one or two specials a day. On a recent evening, in addition to an heirloom tomato-salad special anchored by a Burrata-stuffed squash blossom, there was a daily "local market fish" preparation, pan-seared and accompanied by

"farmer's market garnishes."

I half expected a Gulf fish (Morton's roots are in Louisiana), but his pick of wild-caught Arctic char was revelation. The fillet was served with its rich, oceanic-tasting skin so crisp you could have bounced a dime off it. (I couldn't help but think that the crackling skin would have rolled up into the world's best salmon-skin sushi hand roll.) The pink flesh underneath was moist and subtle, freshened by a shallot-and-tomato vinaigrette. Infant green and wax beans, carefully sectioned and barely cooked, came along for the ride.

It was a dish I will remember for a long, long time.

The restaurant still offers its \$17 three-course lunch, a nice downtown institution. Yet it would be a shame to miss that duck confit salad, which is not one of the prix-fixe options; or the grilled flatbread with a tangle of marinated local peppers, goat cheese from Sealy and more of those delicious baby arugula leaves.

I could eat that flatbread for breakfast, lunch and dinner, especially if I had a vivid glass of Glen Eldon Australian Riesling — another unconventional, reasonably priced Turner pick — to go along.

Morton is just now getting his dessert menu up and running, in collaboration with Courtney Goff, a colleague of his from his days at Cityzen in D. C. (Morton's last posting was at well-regarded Navio on the coast near San Francisco.) Goff is here for the summer, filling in while a permanent replacement is sought for the departed Jamie

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Kling, who left soon after she and Morton were announced in January as the new 17 team.

Morton and Goff are planning such enticements as peppermint soufflé glace that will be coated with "magic shell" chocolate right at the table; and palate-cleansing sake snow cones topped with local mulberry syrup. A preview of Goff's fresh-apricot clafouti, served with wild honey gelée and a floral chamomile sorbet, proved very promising.

Morton looks well positioned to build on the restaurant's good reputation, hard won by the talented Jeff Armstrong and Ryan Pera. He's excited about local ingredients and already has plunged headlong into curing his own salumi and sausages.

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