

# MCNINCH HOUSE RESTAURANT

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It's entirely understandable if an evening at McNinch House evokes fantasies that you're suddenly wound up on the set of Gosford Park or in the pages of an Agatha Christie novel. The most elegant and understated of Charlotte restaurants, which has received the AAA Four Diamond Award for the last five years, makes you feel as if you're dining in a private home. Perhaps that's because you are. The home in question is a circa-1892 house in historic Fourth Ward, built by former Charlotte mayor Sam McNinch. His daughter Maddie, whose portrait hangs in the entry hall, lived in the house fifty years, during which time McNinch House- like much of uptown Charlotte- fell into unfashionable disrepair.

Enter Ellen Davis, the owner-chef who literally lives upstairs. When she bought the house in 1978, she says it was "in such terrible condition that it was traumatic to live here. There were no electrical outlets on the floor and the plumbing was so bad that it took 45 minutes to fill the bathtub." Not to mention that 14 years ago, Fourth Ward wasn't yet the flower-strewn, gentrified neighborhood you find today. "The area could be absolutely scary," says Ellen, a native Charlottean who grew up in Plaza-Midwood. "I've always loved old houses, but this was a case of 'Be careful what you wish for.' Renovation was a never-ending process."

Ellen, who is a completely self-taught chef, originally began as a caterer, building her business while simultaneously restoring the house. "Catering was always a means to an end," she says, "because banks don't loan money to people with no experience who want to open restaurants, so I had to finance everything myself." When she finally opened for business in 1988, ten years after purchasing the house, there were no drapes on the walls, she was using her own crystal and china, and she found it so hard to find servers that she was both cooking and waiting the tables.

Ellen may not have had drapes and reliable electricity, but before long she did have the redoubtable Greg Hardee, who showed up when McNinch House had been open a mere three weeks. "I was willing to work for the catering company," Greg says, "because at that time the most exciting dining in town was going on in private homes."

"When I said I was opening a restaurant, he said, 'I wait tables too' and I thought 'Yeah, right...'" Ellen recalls with a laugh. (These two have been a team for so long that they finish each other's stories like an old married couple.) "I'd given up on finding a good server. But what I didn't realize is that while I was interviewing him, he was interviewing

me too, trying to decide if I was worthy of his expertise.” Greg, a native of Lake Charles, Louisiana, was fresh from fifteen years of fine dining experience in Boca Raton, Florida and he saw immediately that Ellen was attempting to do something extraordinary. “Six courses...small plates...no menu...chef’s choice...reservations only...Ellen was ahead of her time,” says Greg, who is now the manager. “She was doing something that you couldn’t find anywhere, much less in Charlotte, and I wondered if it were too unique to be appreciated.” But the business grew steadily, fueled strictly by word of mouth and gushing press reviews, since McNinch House has never advertised. “We say we’re a bit undercover and people have to find us,” says Greg. “But actually our customer finds our customer. People will be sitting at the tables and they’ll suddenly say ‘You know who would love this?’ And then they tell the friends who are the sort of people who’ll appreciate the experience.”

The McNinch House is the ultimate destination for special occasions, especially proposals. “Leave the ring until the last course,” Ellen sagely advises. “That way if she says ‘No’ at least you’ve still enjoyed your dinner.” Anniversaries and birthdays are often celebrated, and the front window in the parlor is the most romantic table in the house. On a typical night, McNinch House seats up to eight tables, but you can “close the house” for parties of up to 34 people, usually rehearsal dinners and weddings. (Ellen’s plumber, who spent so much time here that he’s practically family, was married at McNinch House.) If you just want to throw a dinner party and play Lord and Lady of the Manor- without actually owning the manor, that is- reserve the large table in the conservatory.

Not all the proposals are of the romantic kind. The McNinch House is also popular for business dinners. “People come here to close the deal,” Greg says. “If you need it to go well, we take care of everything.” With a set price of \$90 per person for the six-course meal (with wine, cocktails, tax, and tip, the cost rises to an average of \$165), McNinch House is not exactly the kind of place you casually drop into on the way to a movie. “A regular customer for us is someone who comes in twice a year,” says Greg. “On any given night, half of our clientele is completely new to us.”

The one exception to this rule is the Christmas season, which is so popular that the restaurant stays open every night in December and remains busy with overflow guests well into January. Many December evenings are sold out by the fall. During less busy times, McNinch is open Tuesday through Saturday and a week’s notice for reservations is usually sufficient. Reservations are taken thirty minutes apart to give guests a chance to tour the house before they dine and to keep the small staff from becoming overwhelmed. (Through the years Ellen and Greg have assembled a loyal team of long-term employees, who do everything from valet parking the cars to scrubbing pots.)

On the evening I arrive with our publisher Katherine Stefan and Performing Arts Editor Mary Anne Gauthier, we’re ushered into dining room for the customary glass of champagne. Soon we’re seated in the richly comfortable library, where each table has different china and stemware, from Ellen’s extensive private collection. There is a word for this type of mood and environment, but I can’t seem to think of it. Never mind. The food is upon us.

The first course is a delectable shrimp stuffed with crab, and the same crab recipe is the base of McNinch's famed crabcakes. I once went to a party at McNinch House where otherwise civilized people were shoving and nudging each other to get at these crabcakes.

Greg says that as he was coming in this afternoon he found Ellen, a notable perfectionist, de-seeding yellow tomatoes for the second course, a beautiful golden gazpacho. "I just got the idea for this recipe yesterday," she says. She constantly peruses cookbooks, and she enjoys the freedom to change her menu on a whim. "I had a lot of friends in the restaurant business when I began," says Ellen, "and I saw them going crazy. They were cooking too many kinds of food, and never knew from night to night how many people were coming in. I knew I wanted to control it- to know from the reservations exactly how many people to expect and to be able to create dishes as I dreamed them up. This way it's more like a nightly dinner party than a restaurant."

"Salads are among our prissier courses," she says, as Greg delivers a beautiful summer salad carefully balanced in a cucumber vase. "We try to make them as fussy as we can." A palate-cleansing sorbet follows the salad. A bit more down-home, but equally yummy, are Ellen's phenomenal angel biscuits.

Entrees are the one course set in advance. When you call in to make your reservation, you're given a choice of entrees based on a seasonal menu. I've selected the Norwegian salmon, which arrives daily on dry ice, and is served with a pecan-herb crust and a roasted bell pepper sauce. Mary Anne has a bone-in veal chop on a sauce of shitake mushrooms and port. Katherine has chosen a traditional surf and turf, with a dramatic Swiss cheese sauce that, as Greg says, "marries the lobster and petite filet."

We have a rule in the food writing business- you take two bites and rotate your plate to the person on your left, and this ritual continues until someone passes out from sheer gluttony. Normally I love eating off of other people's plates, and have even been known to take a long, circuitous path to the ladies room specifically so that I can cop a glance at what everyone else is eating. But the salmon is so great that I'm actually loath to pass it on to Mary Anne. Not to worry-the veal, lobster, and filet are also wonderful.

We finish with a white chocolate cheesecake laced with Gewurztraminer. I remember something Greg said earlier in the evening, that he'd eat anything Ellen prepares, even if it's not a food he usually likes. Normally I'm neither a fan of cheesecake nor white chocolate, but this is one dynamite dessert, the kind that keeps your fork moving even as your conscience is howling in protest.

As we moved through our six courses, we tried three different wines. Greg, who is master of McNinch's impressive and eclectic cellar, has a policy of never telling people what the wine is until after they've tasted it, and we quickly fall into a game of "Name that Wine." Katherine easily identifies the first as a New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc (a 2001 Geisen Marlborough, to be exact) but we are stumped by the second white, which has a distinct honey-clover nose. We're thinking perhaps an Alsatian, but after some teasing, Greg

finally turns the label to reveal a 1997 Domaine des Baumard Sauvinnere from France's Loire Valley.

Say what? Surely we can be forgiven for missing that one.

Although pairing a wine with our three very different entrees might stump a less savvy sommelier, Greg produces a 1995 Piat de syrah which nicely finishes off the evening. Greg and Ellen walk us out on the lovely front porch with its flowers and swings. There's a full moon and our car is waiting in the driveway. "This is a princess place," says Mary Anne, waving her long-stemmed Fire and Ice rose favor as if it were a fairy wand. Indeed McNinch House, thanks to the elegant setting, remarkable cuisine, and Ellen's unswerving hospitality, has the power to make an average Thursday evening magical. And suddenly the word I've been trying to think of all night comes to me. It's transportative.