

Written by Allen Maurer. This article originally appeared in the May 1998 issue of Charlotte's Best Magazine.

Dining at the McNinch House (511 N. Church St.) in Fourth Ward is an experience with elements of theater, choreographed in elegant Victorian surroundings and paced to the leisurely, evening-long meals of that era. Opened ten years ago by the ever-young Ellen Davis, who oversaw restoration of the historic home, The McNinch House recently won AAA's prestigious Four Diamond designation, an honor shared by only one other Charlotte restaurant (La Bibliotheque).

We arrived early for the reservation-only, six-course, three-and-a-half hour dinner, enjoyed an appetizer and a glass of bubbly in the parlor, then toured the remarkably furnished home, luxurious, even gaudy in its eclectic Victorian mix of burnished wood, candles, etched crystal, antique china and furniture. When Davis bought the house she saw the romance but not the flaws: "It was a mess. It had one working outlet. I used it to make a pot of coffee and thought 'what have I done?' But I still had the vision, so I just set about it."

Some indication of Davis' success at The McNinch House is that it is big with visiting Wall Street businessmen and hosts many corporate affairs, but a third of its business comes from local patrons.

The McNinch House was built in 1892 for \$35,000, quite a sum in those days. Three generations of McNinch's, a prominent Charlotte political family, lived in the house beginning in 1902. Sam McNinch (the first) served as Charlotte's Mayor. Sam (the second) went to Davidson at the same time as future President Woodrow Wilson, a connection which located an Army camp here during World War I, leading to much development in Dilworth, Elizabeth, and other neighborhoods. Sam (the third) was on the Charlotte school board during the school integration period when the city was under national scrutiny.

On a typical evening, guests who are to dine at the eight tables arrive at 30 minute intervals, but enjoy their table for the entire event, and it is indeed as much event as dinner. The half hour between arrivals allows Davis, or Greg Hardee, maitré d, to greet guests and show the house. Guests enjoy champagne and appetizers in a cozy Victorian parlor, then tour the three dining rooms, originally the house's parlor, conservatory, and library, complete with a wonderful coffered wood ceiling. Fire flickers in the fireplace and the lights are low.

Hardee, who calls Davis "a natural talent who doesn't know what the restaurant clichés are," notes "she had no restaurant experience. She's just a local gal with incredible style and taste. A restaurateur wouldn't put out eight different sets of china and crystal. Her taste runs to the Victorian." Hardee engages in conversation with the guests or serves the dinner so unobtrusively as to be invisible. You look down and notice your silverware is different almost with surprise.

Everyone eats the same appetizer, salad, and dessert, but chooses an entrée in advance, when the reservation is made. Most repeat customers, Greg says, "just trust us." We found this good advice.

At the table, we enjoyed an appetizing first course of Lobster in a tomato-based sauce with bowtie pasta. Soup came next and Davis is passionate about her soups. “She says you can judge a restaurant by its soup,” Greg told us. “So it’s a high point.” This night’s offering was a creamy artichoke bisque served with pan-fried cornbread. “Very soulful,” is the way Greg described it.

Delicate in flavor, but with a superb texture, it gives Southern Cooking a completely different connotation from those you may harbor now.

The salad was a Victorian as the fresh flower arrangement on the table, and, indeed, included flowers. The dressing: a delicious curry and pear-chutney blend. The intricately designed chilled salad forks added to the experience. In fact, Davis collects antique glassware, china and silverware, making each table setting unique.

After a palate-cleansing sorbet, it was time for the entrees.

Our party of four first sampled McNinch’s signature dish, rack of lamb. Roasted with fresh rosemary (from their own rosemary bush beside the back door), garlic, hot sauce, red wine, it was pink from end to end. Ellen Davis, who Greg points out, has no formal culinary training, developed this superb method of cooking lamb so every bite is “just right.” Our most experienced lamb aficionado praised the result.

Next, we tried the salmon, which Davis air-ships from Norway, then grills in herbs with fresh pecans and roasted red bell pepper in wine sauce. The Duck L’Orange, the very classic French dish with sun-dried cherries soaked in port wine sauce was a favorite. Veal chop with Shitake mushroom in a dark, syrupy port wine sauce completed the entrees. Each course came accompanied by a wine chosen especially for the dish by Greg Hardee. He tastes an average of four to ten wines a day, looking for vintages that are “good right now.” Currently the cellar stocks some 60 wines, representing some 30 wineries. “I judge them strictly by taste,” Hardee says. “Wine is a big part of what we do here.” He admits he’s passionate about wines and we found him very knowledgeable. We enjoyed all his selections, especially a Meritage, “California’s answer to Bordeaux,” called the Novelist.

For dessert, Davis produced a rather magnificent white and dark chocolate pyramid with hazelnut mousse inside, sitting in Frangelica liqueur. This confection disappeared like an outdoor ice sculpture in July. Good coffee, too. And each lady gets a rose with her dessert. Nice touch.

As a piece of theater that takes you to another era of “graciousness taken to an extreme degree,” as Mr. Hardee puts it, we gave the McNinch House a standing ovation.

Written by Allen Maurer. This article originally appeared in the May 1998 issue of Charlotte’s Best Magazine.