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## WELL DONE!

*Deliciously Different Cooking at Belden House*

BY CHARLES DUBOW

“I normally don’t like octopus, but this is amazing,” said my wife, Melinda, the other night while dining at Litchfield’s Belden House & Mews. We had ordered it because the two women at the table next to us raved about it. Too often octopus is overcooked and chewy, but this was perfection: lightly charred on the outside, succulent on the inside, and enhanced with charred eggplant and

smoked yogurt. Delicious.

In fact, the whole meal was delicious—and different. Chef Tyler Heckman is doing something very creative in the kitchen, and his food defies easy categorization. Like many chefs, he uses seasonal ingredients sourced from local farms—but he then gives them interesting little tweaks that make every dish distinctive. For example, one of the starters is six

fresh Pink Moon oysters from Prince Edward Island that—instead of being served with traditional mignonette sauce—come with homemade green strawberry sauce, with horseradish jam for an extra kick.

For 11 years before coming to Litchfield, Heckman (who is a Connecticut native and a UConn grad) worked in New York City at such celebrated kitchens as El Quijote,

photographs by JIM HENKENS

Toro, Ferris, and Villanelle. “I saw a lot of creativity go away in the city,” he says. “Everyone was chasing the latest trend. My style is unique. I am all about flavor, and work really hard to find the right balance of ingredients—like tonight’s braised short rib. For a while, I was serving them with sour cherry, cipollini onion, and black garlic; but tonight I used persimmon and sunchoke, which is not something you would normally think of but I think it really works.” It really does. The short ribs are fantastic.

Heckman’s most recent stop was at Troutbeck in Amenia, New York, where he worked while the

19th-century Belden House was being renovated. This is important to note, as Troutbeck and Belden have the same owners, and both have benefited from the interior design work of owners Champalimaud Design, which did the extremely comfortable yet chic dining room and its bijou bar. (A note about the bar: The wine list is not extensive, but smart and well-priced, and all spirits are from small producers.)

Back to the food. Unless you are allergic to gluten, you must order the sourdough focaccia, which is warm and light and airy and crunchy and moist. Served with koji cultured butter, it was one of the best things I’ve

ever eaten. (I know the old saw about not filling up on bread, but in this case go ahead and carbo load.) Speaking of carbs, the fresh pastas are also terrific. On the night we were there we had the cappelletti with local mushrooms and a rich parmesan broth, and a piquant squid ink chitarra with ’nduja salami and razor clams.

Because Belden House is a 31-room inn, it is open seven days a week—and also provides breakfast and lunch, which are more casual but no less carefully conceived. Fortunately, the focaccia is also available at lunch.

*Belden House & Mews, 31 North St., Litchfield. —beldenhouse.com*

