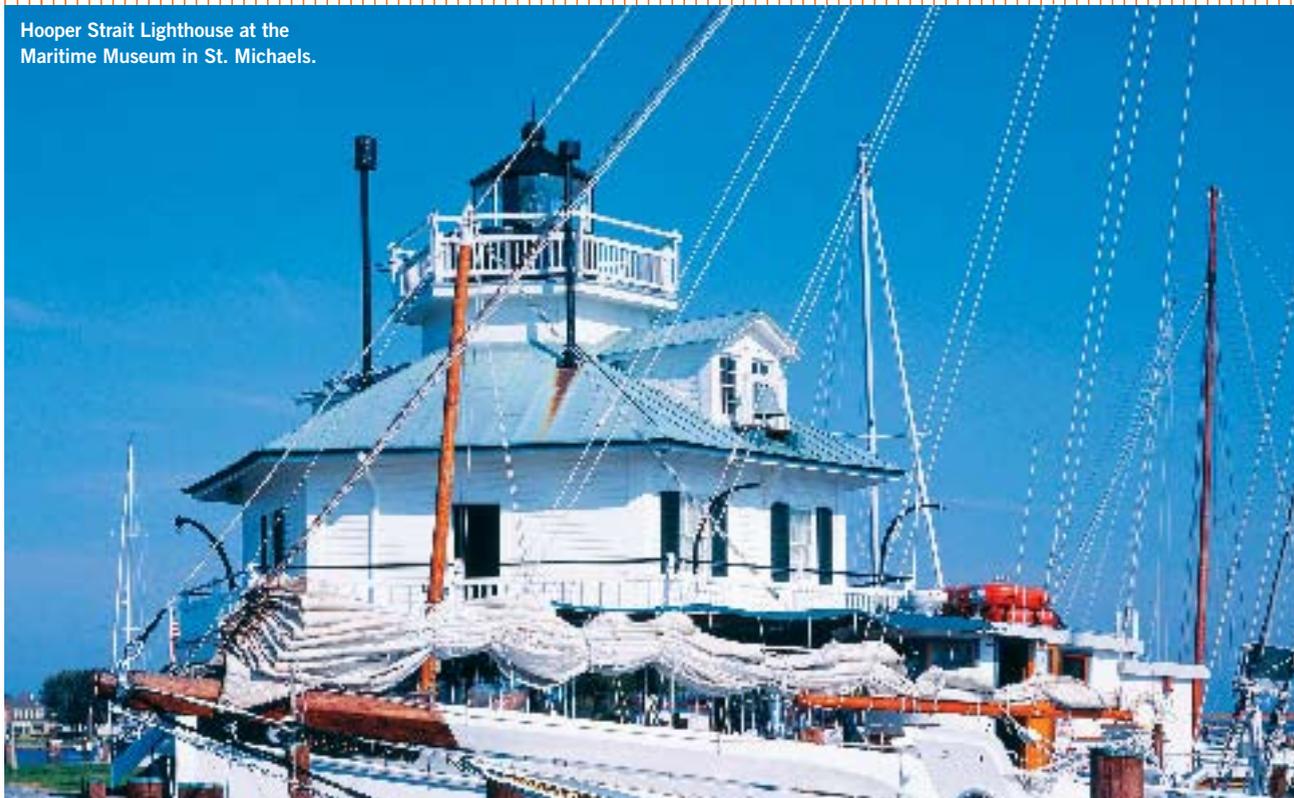


Hooper Strait Lighthouse at the Maritime Museum in St. Michaels.



baywatch

The ol' Chesapeake—awash in new flavor

BY SHANA LIEBMAN

WHILE MARYLAND'S CHESAPEAKE BAY has long been a popular destination for summer homes, sportfishing and antiques, the three main towns that make up the Eastern Shore (Easton, St. Michaels and Oxford) have recently attracted a new crop of talent: young entrepreneurs who want to infuse sophistication with tradition.

One of them is chef Andrew Evans, who opened the acclaimed Inn at Easton in 2000. "I looked everywhere for a place to open a B&B," he says. Then he found Easton—only 112 miles from Philadelphia and 70 from Washington, D.C. "It's the perfect town. There's no attitude—it's more like *Cheers* and not at all like the Hamptons." Barbara Helish moved here from New Jersey to open her restaurant, Bella Luna. "There's just not the same level of stress

down here," she says, busily plating eight different entrées in her one-person kitchen. And Grant Friedman, who opened the successful Scossa restaurant here in 2005, agrees. Friedman previously managed the St. Regis and Ritz-Carlton hotels in Manhattan but chose Easton because "it's a charming, well-preserved town with great boutiques, culture, art and fine dining. And it's near the water and the beach." It's this kind of enthusiasm, Evans says, that's "shaking things up, for the better."

EASTON

Often called one of America's best small towns, Easton has rows of Federal and Victorian buildings that make up its downtown core. Hill's Drug Store, opened in 1928, still has an old-fashioned soda

fountain where you can order grilled cheese sandwiches and ice cream sundaes. Nearby is the art deco Avalon Theatre, where Gary Cooper attended the world premiere of his film, *His First Kiss*.

Although many Easton shops are closed on Sunday, there's always the open-air Sunday antiques market (from April through November), with live music and about 40 vendors selling pottery, decoys, paintings, silver, jewelry, garden items and vintage clothing. Golfers can spend the day at Hog Neck's 27 holes on the outskirts of town. The 255 gorgeous acres have a large putting green, a newly designed chipping-green complex and a driving range with both grass and mat hitting areas.

Last year, Restaurant Local opened at the Historic Tidewater Inn, part of the 1712

CHESAPEAKE

establishment's big makeover. Its extensive menu relies on (yes) local ingredients—the “country amuse-bouche” is a small farm jar of pickled vegetables, a quirky prelude to entrees like crab cakes artfully splattered with herbed butter. The most popular seat here seems to be at the trendy blue bar, where you can watch the giant TV screens while sipping a spicy Bloody Mary martini.

At Scossa, an elegant Northern Italian restaurant, chef Giancarlo Tondin—formerly of Cipriani's in New York—and owner Grant Friedman get everything right: the perfect cocktails at the romantically lit bar; the well-informed staff; and memorable dishes that change daily—like creamy risotto, and sautéed scallops with shiitake salad.

Food critic R.W. Apple wrote his last restaurant review about his fantastic meal at the Inn at Easton's Australian-themed restaurant. You'd never expect to find this

kind of food in rural Maryland: crisp-skinned rockfish with wild rice and spinach in a saffron-vanilla sauce; crab salad with papaya, fried shallots and chili-lime dressing. Although Evans recently closed the inn, he plans to reopen it this year with a new partner and is also launching a much-anticipated high-end Thai restaurant in Easton.

Barbara Helish started Bella Luna as an Italian specialty market, selling cheese, Italian cold cuts and sandwiches. It quickly evolved into an 11-table restaurant and is frequented by both locals and the weekending elite—the likes of Dick Cheney and friends. While Bella Luna's menu changes often, you can count on the cheese and antipasti plate: three tasty artisanal cheeses, salami rounds, Helish's famous grilled artichokes and crisp French bread. “I make food the way I like it,” she says. Her produce comes from three

local farms and, along with many area chefs, she religiously travels the five miles to St. Michaels to attend the Saturday farmers market.

ST. MICHAELS

This is probably the best-known town on the Eastern Shore, perhaps because it's the most tourist-friendly. Talbot Street strictly enforces a 25-mph speed limit and is lined with cute shops like Keepers of St. Michaels, which sells Orvis clothing, and Sympatico (Italian ceramics). St. Michaels Winery, founded in 2005 by two local couples, buys most of its grapes from a vineyard in nearby Wye Mills; visitors can tour the winery and sample a dry white called Long Splice and a 2007 Cabernet Sauvignon.

Another St. Michaels landmark is the Inn at Perry Cabin, where scenes from *Wedding Crashers* were filmed (remember



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27748 St. Michaels Rd.



Seafood store

The Captain’s Ketch is the locals’ favorite for fresh shrimp, littleneck clams and scallops. 316 Glebe Rd., Easton; captains-ketch.com



Fisherman to befriend

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410-310-4637

the event when Owen Wilson is smitten?). This posh 81-room hotel—built in 1816 and recently updated by Orient-Express—is worth a visit, even if you’re not staying there. The nautical-themed restaurant, Sherwood’s Landing, has great river views. And you don’t have to be a guest to visit the inn’s new Linden Spa, whose signature Five Flowers Solace treatment detoxifies with a blend of white clay, blue cornflower, rose, chamomile, jasmine and rosehips.

The fascinating Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum is comprised of 10 small buildings and open sheds clustered around a large lawn. Among the exhibits are historic artifacts (a Civil War cannonball, a lieutenant’s letter to his mother during the Battle of 1812); different kinds of fishing boats; a lighthouse with the original fog bell; a boat-building workshop displaying tools, rigging and blueprints (you can even sign up to apprentice here for a day); and a guide to the area’s wildlife, including, of course, its seafood—rockfish, oysters, eel, clams and blue crab.

Conveniently, the Crab Claw Restaurant, a great place to eat blue crab, is right next door. Choose a seat on the deck and ask for a pitcher of beer and a tray of crabs. The young waiters will joyfully scatter the shellfish (cooked in spicy Old Bay seasoning) on a butcher-paper-covered picnic table.

The busiest restaurant in town is Bistro St. Michaels, a century-old clapboard house with a zinc bar and marble-top tables on the first floor. David Stein prepares hearty French-inspired dishes like grilled shrimp with tomato-chipotle butter, or frisee with duck confit, goat cheese, beets and crispy onion rings. Lesser-known (but often tastier) is the restaurant at the St. Michaels Harbour Inn Marina & Spa, a pretty hotel on the water. You can order bar food, like juicy burgers and thick crab cakes, or creative gourmet dishes, either inside or outdoors by the marina.

OXFORD

Although you can drive to Oxford, the best route is via the Bellevue Ferry, which makes



Part of the new Linden Spa at the Inn at Perry Cabin.

the 10-minute trip across the Tred Avon River every 15 to 20 minutes. One of Maryland’s oldest towns, Oxford is peaceful and pristine. James Michener wrote his novel *Chesapeake* here and often lunched at the Robert Morris Inn, which he rightly claimed made the area’s best crab cakes. Just up the road is Latitude 38 Bistro & Spirits, another lovely place for a lunch of baked oysters or grilled salmon. Or you can settle down for a picnic (preferably with some takeout from Bella Luna) at the town’s waterside park.

The best way to explore Oxford is by bike (you can rent one from Easton Cycle & Sport, and take it on the ferry for a \$5 round-trip fee). As you roam the residential tree-lined streets, you’re more likely to see a lemonade stand than a McDonald’s. Oxford resembles the Eastern Shore of 50 years ago.

The Oxford Museum also presents a first-rate glimpse of the past—with old photographs, clothing, antique boat-building tools and paintings. And to commemorate Oxford’s 325th anniversary this year, the town plans to hang art in public spaces, and to auction off individually painted flags. There’s no lack of nostalgia in this neck of the woods.

