

# SOPHISTO SOUTHERN

**Apopka's Highland Manor** goes gourmet regional with a decidedly local flavor:

by Pam Brandon • photographs by C. Jordan Harris

**Honey from a beekeeper in Winter Park...** heirloom tomatoes from a grower in Mount Dora... goat cheese from a dairy in Georgia... country ham from Tennessee... hand-milled artisanal grains from South Carolina... Poulet Rouge Fermier chickens,

a rustic breed imported from France and grown on small farms in North Carolina... seasonal Zellwood corn. The grocery list for the kitchen at Highland Manor in Apopka is a fantasy for foodie progressives who see local cuisine as the way to eat.





Highland Manor melds upscale Southern charm with a lively cosmopolitan atmosphere, most notably found in the bar where patrons listen to live music while enjoying organic beer and small bites.

And Chefs John Mooney and Scott Barton add a dash of eclectic shopping from afar: Point Reyes blue cheese from California and sustainably produced shrimp from Belize, for instance.

"It's all about sustainable and responsible food sourcing," Mooney says.

"Starting with exceptional food produced by artisans on a small scale makes our job easy," Barton adds. "We want to

keep alive local food traditions and regional specialties that are being lost."

"Local" refers to food grown or raised within about 250 miles – although the distance varies – or food connected to a specific place: Tennessee country ham, Plant City strawberries, Vidalia onions, Florida hearts of palm.

Mooney describes Highland Manor's cuisine as "American with Southern flair." The quail

isn't classically roasted; instead, it's dipped in buttermilk, deep fried and served with braised greens. Veal is stuffed with country ham for a down-home version of saltimbocca. Mooney and Barton have cooked around the globe, and the diverse menu shows off their skills.

Mooney bought the old McBride house with partners Mick O'Sullivan and Paul Nicaj, both industry veterans who

Highland Manor returns to its former splendor with clubby private dining rooms and leisurely dining.



also own restaurants and bars in New York City. They saw great potential in the location that longtime Central Floridians will remember as Townsend's Plantation, and more recently as The Captain and The Cowboy. The large Queen Anne-style mansion was built in 1903 in downtown Apopka, the home of Dr. Thomas McBride, who lived and practiced medicine there from 1920 until his death in 1978. In 1985, the home was

moved to its present site at U.S. Hwy. 441 and State Road 436, where peacocks roam under ancient oaks.

The new owners are returning Highland Manor to its former splendor with clubby private dining rooms with plush antiques, soft colors and a very leisurely style of dining. In spite of the restaurant's Victorian grandeur, there's nothing stuffy about this retro retreat. There's friendly service and a lively bar





that's filled, on most nights, with locals there to hear live music, sip Orlando Brewing organic beer and nosh on fried oysters with green chile buttermilk dressing, baked goat cheese with roasted garlic or a few grilled lamb chop lollipops with pistachio and mint pesto.

A favorite spot for lunch, dinner or Sunday brunch is the air-conditioned wraparound back porch. Diners can look out the windows at vegetables growing in pristine white hydroponic towers: Persian cucumbers, four kinds of lettuce, basil and chives.

Pots of peppers, mint and rosemary flourish in the Florida sun.

You can make a meal on the starters, such as the Southern country ham platter; a tasting of artisanal hams from Kentucky and Tennessee with a side of house-made pimento cheese (a nod to Southern chef Edna Lewis, whom Mooney cooked with in New York). The jumbo lump crab cake is beautifully seasoned with no filler and is plenty for two to share.

Entrée standouts include the crispy soft shell crab with grapefruit, fennel and hazelnuts; sublime seared scallops on

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creamy Zellwood corn sauce; and grilled salmon marinated in gin and tonic with paper-thin slices of grilled cauliflower.

Apopka native Nicole Potter, a graduate of Valencia Community College's baking and pastry arts program, is the Manor's pastry chef. Save room for her New Fangled Hummingbird Cake with coconut sabayon and pecans and Persian orange cake with brown sugar ice cream fig coulis.

The chefs have created a very welcoming space for weddings, private parties and family-friendly events, such as

movies on the lawn every Saturday night and live concerts. Looking ahead, Mooney and Barton have plans for a farmer's market in the restaurant's parking lot.

"Hospitality is a personality-driven business," Mooney says. "All the relationships we create contribute to what we do and who we are. I want people to know when they leave our restaurant that whoever served them and prepared their food cares and believes in the product."

For more information, visit [highlandmanorapopka.com](http://highlandmanorapopka.com). ●



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## Seared Diver Scallops With Creamed Corn

### INGREDIENTS

- |                                     |                                |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 4 diver scallops with nerve removed | 1 hen of the woods mushroom    |
| 1 white onion diced                 | 1 bunch sliced chives          |
| 4 cobs shucked corn                 | 1 oz. grapeseed oil            |
| 2 oz. heavy cream                   | shellfish broth (recipe below) |
| 2 tbsp. unsalted butter             | salt and pepper                |

### Shellfish broth

- 1 white onion sliced
- 1 fennel bulb sliced
- 1 bottle white wine
- 1 lb. shrimp or lobster shells

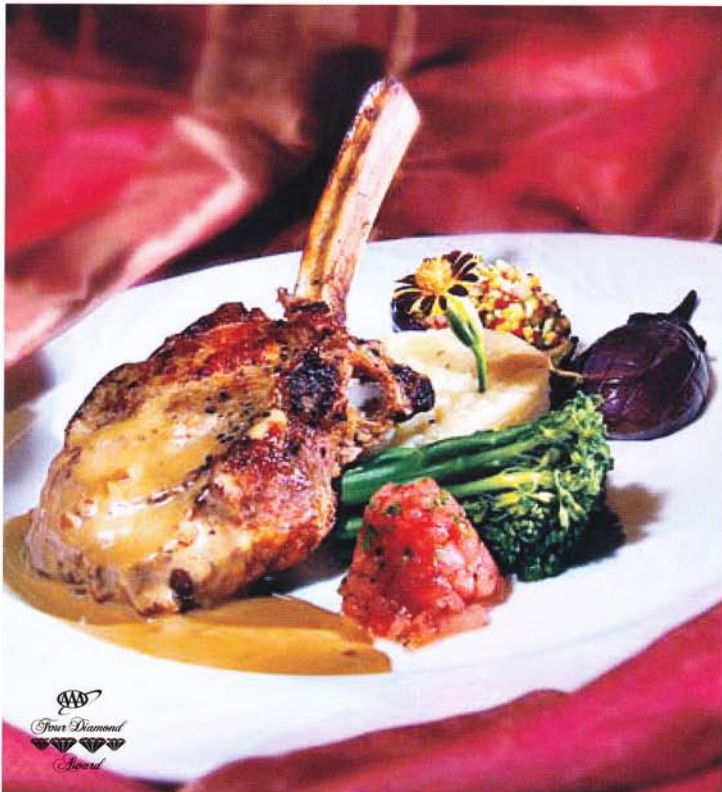
In a sauce pot, sweat the fennel and onion with the shells until translucent. Add white wine and reduce by half. Cover with cold water and bring to a simmer for 45 minutes. Strain and reserve.

### PROCEDURE:

Sweat onions in a sauté pan until translucent. Add corn and warm through. Next, add cream and reduce to sauce consistency. Garnish with chives and season with salt and pepper. Reserve until plating.

Season the scallops with salt and pepper. Place grapeseed oil in a hot sauté pan and sear the scallops 3 minutes and turn. Next, add the mushrooms to pan and sear the scallops another 3 minutes.

Place a spoonful of corn in the center of the bowl. Put the scallops on top of the corn. In the same pan, add a ladle of broth. Mount with butter until sauce consistency. Drizzle over the scallops and garnish with cooked mushrooms.



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