

## ***In the Kitchen – Jason Ambrose at Salt***

*written by Lars Rusins*

I am sure that many of us have fond food memories from childhood. Jason Ambrose recalls summertime visits to his grandfather's Connecticut home, which always seemed to be filled with fruits and vegetables from the surrounding gardens.

Ambrose can picture himself, as a small boy of four or five, sitting at the kitchen table and watching his grandfather eat a piece of melon, fresh from the garden. His grandfather salted each piece before he popped it into his mouth.

“My grandfather said that it was the only way he could ever remember eating melon,” Ambrose said.

Ambrose is now 34, engaged to be married, and the executive chef and owner of Salt Tavern, a name inspired by that memory of his grandfather and the melon. Ambrose has drawn upon memories to create the menu and hire the staff at Salt.

Arriving in Baltimore in late 1998, Ambrose was the sous chef who helped open Charleston when it moved to its new location on Lancaster Street. From there, Ambrose worked with Spike Gjerde and opened Atlantic and also spent time at John Steven, Henninger's, and Soigné. When it came time to staff Salt, Ambrose remembered these Baltimore stops on his resume. His staff includes personnel from Soigné, John Steven, and Henninger's, as well as Bicycle and Brasserie Tatin.

Nearly half of Salt's menu has been culled from Ambrose's memory of dishes he's made throughout his career and improved upon at Salt. When asked to circle these dishes on his menu, Ambrose was surprised to see that all are seafood dishes. Considering his extensive work in the seafood meccas of Connecticut and Baltimore, perhaps he shouldn't have been surprised.

One can easily see the melding of Ambrose's personal and professional memories. The salmon is simply oven-roasted, but jumbo lump crab pierogies are added and the dish is finished with a tomato chive beurre blanc. The scallops are pan-seared, but a salad of roasted corn and teardrop tomato salad finished with basil vinaigrette replaces a standard vegetable side. This is a menu full of memories, delicious and comforting memories.

When asked about his favorite item on the menu, Ambrose, without a moment's hesitation, selected the foie gras and slider burger, prepared with a truffle aioli and red onion marmalade. To Ambrose, this dish is “very indulgent and rich” and “not what you'd expect to find at a neighborhood tavern.”

“When I bite into it and feel the juices explode in my mouth, and sometimes dribble out, it's sheer, unadulterated joy,” Ambrose said. “Something kind of playful and not stuffy.”

The only part of Salt not built from memories is the building itself. Located at the corner of Pratt Street and Collington Avenue, Salt occupies the space that once housed a bar

called Fran's. Ambrose has had the location for about 18 months and gutted it to make way for his eatery.

Ambrose has created a tavern like no tavern you've seen before in Baltimore, with the additions of a granite bar, a mirrored and backlit back bar, some blue felt and black banquettes, and touches like the blue ceiling and hanging green drop lights. As is common in rehabs in Baltimore, Salt features exposed brick walls and lots of natural light from three large windows along Pratt Street.

Salt seats 45 people comfortably, 58 if you add the bar. Yes, that's right: a lucky 13 people can sit at the bar and order from the full menu.

Although many local chefs, restaurant owners, and Ambrose's former employers have visited Salt to offer their support and congratulations, one important person was unable to make Salt's opening. Sadly, Ambrose's grandfather passed away the week before. He may be gone, but his memory lives on with Ambrose and in Baltimore's Salt Tavern.

2127 East Pratt St. – in Butcher's Hill

410-276-5480

Hours M – Th: 5-10pm

F & Sat 5-11pm

Closed Sunday

<http://www.salttavern.com/>

*Ambrose, a true Baltimorean, is an Orioles fan and owns a Sunday season ticket plan.*