

Bidwell at Union Market

By Tom Sietsema, Updated: Thursday, March 20,



The most ambitious restaurant to date at Union Market takes its name from a 19th-century U.S. Army general and places a chef who has cooked all over the world in its open kitchen.

Bidwell, situated off the entrance of the artisanal market near Gallaudet University in Northeast Washington, salutes John Bidwell, a military man who founded Chico, Calif., and developed a melon that bears his name. Behind the menu is Chicago native John Mooney, who cooked at the late Red Sage in Washington in the mid-1990s and went on to work in New York, Florida, Ireland and India.

The food at the 120-seat Bidwell, the chef says, “is a mixture of my history.” Hence the lobster taco, the fish and chips and . . . Swedish meatballs? The last preparation, shaped with pork and beef and draped in a light crème fraîche gravy, pays tribute to Mooney’s mother’s best friend.

It wasn’t lust at first sight at Bidwell for this diner. “Crispy” deviled eggs provide proof that frying doesn’t make everything taste better. An apple dessert arrives oddly dry and fruitless. A return visit found more to like, including those tender meatballs and a “sharing bite” of spinach ignited with dried red chilies, “a carry-over from Red Sage,” says Mooney. Unevenly cooked roast chicken is bested by its plate mates of braised kale and crisp diced potatoes.

My single best memory is of “Gin & Tonic” Verlasso Salmon, fish that’s briefly cured with juniper, coriander and lime zest and poised on a slice of griddled cauliflower. A pool of beurre blanc — fueled with gin rather than the expected white wine — enhances the entree.

With its concrete floors and bare wood tables, the window-wrapped Bidwell looks like a lot of other newcomers to the scene. The restaurant’s most interesting design element might be its rooftop vertical aeroponic garden, from which Mooney hopes to collect herbs, chilies, lettuces and more later in the year. (Air and mist, rather than soil, nurture the produce.) A similar source of ingredients graces the roof of Bell Book & Candle, a restaurant the chef co-owns in Manhattan’s West Village.

Washington appeals to Mooney because it’s a city he’s familiar with, he says, but also because he wants “to be ahead of the curve” in that part of the District. “I have a lot of stock in the vision” of Union Market, he says.

1309 Fifth St. NE. 202-547-0172. bidwelldc.com.
Dinner entrees, \$14 to \$27.

