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DAN'S TASTE: FOOD & DRINK

The Dimon Estate: A Tranquil & Historic Culinary Journey in Jamesport

BY JOE MOLLICA

To simplify the winding, multi-generational story of the Dimon Estate in Jamesport is to spin a yarn about a family of humble 18th century Aquebogue subsistence farmers who, some three generations later, would go on to become a big name in the Victorian-era international shipping trade, and one of the wealthiest families on the North Fork.

But it's also now the story of the nested-in-history restaurant experience called The Dimon Estate that brings the fascinating provenance of its namesake property very literally to the dining table.

The North Fork restaurateur behind the concept is chef-owner Chris Kar, 33, whose interest in the history of the estate led him back to his East End hometown and on the path toward making the sanctuary-like property a casual local dining destination to be reckoned with.

While the Dimon family owned the farm property for nearly two centuries, it was sold in the 1930s and in recent decades was used primarily as a restaurant — first called The Twin Oaks, and later known as Jamesport Manor Inn.

"What I wanted to do was go back to the origin story of the family who lived here two hundred years prior to it becoming a restaurant," said Kar. "So it's not necessarily a change, it's more of a way of honoring the deep past and the origins of this place because, yes, it became a restaurant, but it was someone's house and homestead for 200 years."

Like the property's original forebears, Kar grows heirloom vegetables in the estate's pastoral gardens. He also tends to the apple orchard, tells the story of the Dimon journey through his menus, and runs a pretty sizable kitchen and staff. He gets a big hand from partner, fellow history buff, and bar manager Emily Hammond, who says Chris swept her into the Dimon rabbit hole with him.

"Chris was like 'This place has so much soul, but no one knows what it's about' ... I started googling and I was like, 'Wait, there's a massive story here to tell,' so he does the storytelling through food and I try to do the storytelling through plants and horticulture and cocktails ... the menu really celebrates farm to table and local food."



THE SECOND EMPIRE-STYLE VICTORIAN MANSION ON THE GROUNDS OF THE DIMON ESTATE.



CLAM BOIL AT THE DIMON ESTATE

Kar's menu changes seasonally. During non-summer months you're likely to get a creative dose of Asian fusion that complements the Dimon family's foray in the Chinese spice trade, or Peruvian cuisine inspired by John F. Dimon's Lima-born wife. Right now, though, there's a contemporary American menu doing fun, farm-to-table dishes with flair like homemade corn ravioli, a filet mignon caprese, and lemon ricotta gnocchi.

It's all in a kind of culinary tribute to the Dimon family tree and its ancestral property, whose roots are forever entangled in North Fork farming history, ship-building, and, yes, the Peruvian guano trade.

The backstory begins with the Colonial-era Dimons who would have grown and harvested popular crops of the day like wheat, rye, barley, oats and corn on their multi-acre farm in Jamesport. They also sold hay (for New York City carriage horses) and



CHRIS KAR'S MENU FEATURES INGREDIENTS SOURCED FROM HIS FARM ON THE DIMON ESTATE PROPERTY.

livestock.

Three generations later, the third John Dimon, feeling jaunty, gave up the farm-life for the trappings of Moby Dick-era New York City. He apprenticed his way into the lower Manhattan ship-building trade, eventually building the famed clipper "Sea Witch" that sailed to Hong Kong and back in 74 days (a still-standing record for a mono-hull ship).

It would be his son, however, John F. Dimon, that would eventually make the bulk of the family's fortune in the harvesting and shipping of guano from Peru for use as fertilizer in the United States.

Flush with new wealth, Dimon married a Peruvian woman, and together they returned to the states and purchased the Jamesport family farm from an uncle; Dimon, the last of his line's male descendants, proceeded to tear down the ancestral post-and-beam farmhouse and build on its

footprint a stunning Second Empire-style Victorian mansion, which was expanded (the original mansion was badly damaged in a 2004 fire and subsequently rebuilt). The property continued to be associated with Dimons until it was sold and turned into a restaurant in the 1940s.

The tragic, scandal-scarred end of the Dimons' story in Jamesport is almost as unbelievable as its beginning and middle, but you can learn more about that when you pay Kar and co. a visit.

If the Dimon family's story sounds like it has all the makings of a haunting historical novel, it does, and Mattituck native Kar connects to that energy with a deeply curated menu based partly on the produce that grows on the property (sundry tomatoes, melons, apples, cucumbers, zucchini, etc.).

With backyard-picked ingredients and the bounty of local farm-sourced ingredients, Kar's also doing local summer squash stuffed with farro, almonds, garden tomatoes and Piquillo pepper sauce, topped with goat cheese, as well as duck leg confit in his orchard-made applesauce with duck from nearby Crescent Farms.

Smaller bites that caught our attention were a crispy pork belly (with an apple cider reduction and Jalapeño cheddar grits) and a clam boil with corn, andouille sausage, potatoes and garlic, served with grilled bread.

The cocktails from Hammond's bar also tell the Dimon's truly continental story. There are drinks called The Rosalie (the named of John F. Dimon's Peruvian wife), as well as The Sea Witch (named after Dimon's famous clipper ship that operated in the China Tea trade).

The classically updated Second Empire structure and its country inn-like dining rooms are casual and serene. The weight of history is apparent in the mansion's bold trim and woodwork, as well as in the antique decor — if you cast a look about the walls you're likely to find a replica portrait of John Dimon (the original hangs in the South Street Seaport Museum) or perhaps a rendering of one of his world-class clipper ships.

Visiting the Dimon Estate is really an experience unto itself. Come for the wide-open expanses, tranquil outdoor patios and gardens, and quintessential untouched-by-time North Fork setting, but stay for Chef Kar's intriguing history-through-food experience.

The Dimon Estate is located at 370 Manor Lane, Jamesport. For more information, call 631-722-0500 or visit thedimonestate.com.