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## Steeped in History, Columbia Firehouse Restaurant Opens in Old Town Alexandria

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by Lisa Shapiro

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The new kid on the block of the DC area dining scene is **Columbia Firehouse** in Old Town Alexandria. After bringing us Rammy-winning Vermilion and other neighborhood gems such as Evening Star Café, Tallula, and Rustico, the Neighborhood Restaurant Group added another Northern Virginia establishment to its family, while reviving a beloved piece of Alexandria's history.

Columbia Firehouse occupies the historic building that once served as a local fire station for the *Columbia Steam Engine Fire Company* as early as 1883. The original interior of what used to be Bookbinder's Restaurant, which closed at the end of May, and

before that Portner's, has been left intact with a few modern updates. It has the same charm with a more contemporary appeal. The dining room is small and narrow, yet bright. The décor includes dark table tops and chairs with floors covered in green leafy carpet – the way one would imagine a carpeted Garden of Eden to look. There is also a small outdoor courtyard with dark metal dining tables. Where Columbia No. 4 once put out fires, Chef Orlando Hitzig plans to fire up local diners with his modern American menu. Executive Chef, formerly of Mark and Orlando's in Dupont Circle, Hitzig has cooked in some of DC's best kitchens, such as 701, Vidalia, and 1789.



The new Columbia Firehouse offers two distinct dining experiences under one roof: the lower level main dining room and an upper level chophouse. The 120-seat dining room downstairs offers a casual menu with a focus on modern American comfort food, and includes a broad range of raw bar items, a number of small plates, salads, meats, and seafood.

The "snacks" and small plates offered are dishes inspired from up and along the East Coast, and nothing says summertime like Maryland Blue Crabs and fresh Oysters. Extinguish your desire by starting with the Maryland Blue Crap Dip, Cornmeal Crusted Oysters, or the Blue Crab hushpuppies, which are served as five deliciously golden fried bites with a creamy red pepper remoulade. If

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that doesn't ignite your appetite, try the Maryland Crab Cake sandwich with jicama slaw and Dijon aioli or

delicious corn crusted Shrimp and Oyster Po'Boy. A word to the wise – the crab cake is served fried on a toasted onion roll. If you prefer broiled, just ask your server. The Po'Boy has a mayonnaise-based red pepper slaw which softens the toasted baguette, thus falls apart easily. It's messy but tasty. The Po'Boy' shrimp and oysters are also fried, as are their accompaniments, the handmade crispy fries or hand cut chips.

The menu does include some lighter fare, such as a traditional Caesar salad and some summer salads. Try the Kentucky Bibb Lettuce salad with dried cranberries, toasted almonds, Virginia goat cheese, and sherry vinaigrette, and the Three Tomato Summer salad. Veggie lovers can also opt for the Portobello sandwich with garlic roasted Portobello, goat cheese, and caramelized onions, or the three cheese ravioli with roasted ratatouille on the big plate menu. Meat lovers will devour Columbia Firehouse's burger, made with only the best pasture-raised Angus beef from Chef Nathan Anda's Red Apron Butchery.



The classic chophouse will take shape in the 80-seat upstairs dining room and is slated to open at the end of August 2009. The meats and all of its charcuterie will be prepared by Red Apron. All Columbia Firehouse meats will be sourced from pure breeds at carefully selected local Virginia and Maryland farms that practice responsible farming methods like pasture-raised, without the use of preservatives or hormones. Red Apron's popular charcuterie and sausages will also be staples on a menu that will boast updated classics such as Steak Tartare with pickled mushrooms, caramelized onion aioli, and spicy cheddar "chz-its" and Steamed Mussels with Dijon mustard, smoked bacon, and cornbread croutons. Fresh local oysters from Dragon Creek Aqua Farm will be a mainstay, as will steakhouse side dishes featuring seasonal ingredients, such as white corn succotash with Virginia ham and summer squash ratatouille.

Columbia Firehouse will also house two bars. The main bar, located on the ground floor of the restaurant, will specialize in classic cocktails, including arguably DC's "signature" drink, the Rickey, and others such as Fizzes, Sazeracs, and more. The bar will also feature a great selection of microbrews, assembled by beer master Greg Engert, as well as a wine list designed to highlight extraordinary vintages at affordable prices. The second floor bar and adjoining lounge in the chophouse will be open for special events and will allow cocktail enthusiasts to sample a rotating menu of creative concoctions, as well as aperitifs and after-dinner drinks.



Considering the success of the other Neighborhood Restaurant Group establishments and the enormous buzz on the street, Columbia Firehouse is already on fire!

Columbia Firehouse is located at 109 South Saint Asaph Street, Alexandria, VA / 703.683.1776.

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