

The McNinch House

I thought I had made the biggest mistake of my life," says Ellen Davis with a megawatt dimpled smile. She refers to the opening of McNinch House, the reservations-only restaurant she began more than a decade ago on the first floor of her Church Street home in Charlotte's Fourth Ward neighborhood. The problem? She couldn't find decent wait staff and was obliged to do all the cooking, serving, even the dishwashing, for the elegant restaurant housed in the 1890 former home of Charlotte mayor Sam McNinch. "I would get up in the mornings and grit my teeth and say, 'Come on,

At the reservations-only McNinch House in Charlotte, discerning patrons relish six-course dinners in lush surroundings steeped in history.

girl, you can do it one more day.' "

Two months later, she met Greg Hardee. An experienced waiter, Greg understood the dining experience Ellen envisioned. He now serves as wine steward and manager. "We could have made a big splash when we first opened," says Greg. "But we wanted to create an image where, if you need us, you'll find us. If you don't need us, you'd never think to look." The restaurant continues to promote itself solely

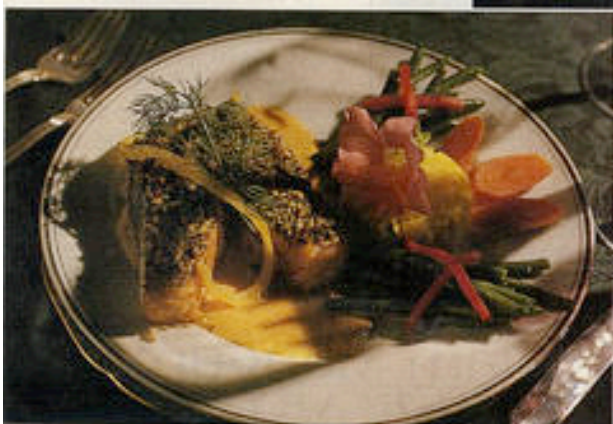
through word of mouth. "We're not for everybody," explains Ellen, who still lives upstairs.

Patrons call a few days in advance to make

reservations and to choose an entrée: lamb, beef tenderloin, salmon, trout, roast duck, or veal chop. Ellen decides the remainder of the six-course dinner, taking into account the client's likes and any allergies.

"I don't really call myself a chef," says Ellen about the "French Continental with a Southern twist" recipes that she developed. "I've just always enjoyed cooking and entertaining and setting a pretty table."

"When I bought the house, it



"I was so scared," says Ellen Davis about those first few days after the restaurant opened. "I prayed the phone wouldn't ring because somebody was going to make a reservation." Soon after, wine steward and manager Greg Hardee joined her and helped establish the image of McNinch House.

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US Airways is providing air transportation for the exhibition's U.S. tour, coming directly from the Forbes home in London.

looked as if somebody had bombed it," she laughs. "The plaster was falling in, the roof was leaking, the chimneys were level with the roofline." After two decades, she says, her romance with the dwelling—and its upkeep—is never ending. She relishes sharing the beautiful home with restaurant guests, using her own extensive collection of antique linens, china, and crystal to dazzle patrons. Elaborate fresh flower arrangements grace the mauve and gleaming-wood parlor and dining areas.

Niceties abound during the three to three-and-a-half hour dinner, which costs \$85 per person plus bar bill, taxes, and tip. "You can't come in here and be in a hurry," Greg says. "You lose all sense of time." Candlelight and classical music create ambience. Chilled salad forks accompany work-of-art salads. Doilies separate cup and saucer and eliminate annoying clinking sounds. Patrons who momentarily leave their tables find their napkins refolded upon their return. Fine wines marry seamlessly with every delectable bite, while dainty edible flowers enhance each beautifully presented course.

Clients range from business executives who want to impress, to people blowing their budget to mark a special occasion. "Half the people who come say, 'You know who would love this place?'" says Greg. "And that's exactly who they tell." The restaurant has even served royalty, namely, the Queen of Tonga, who had come to town for her god-daughter's wedding. Prior to her visit, Greg called the island nation near Samoa

It's like
having
people
come
to your
home.

Ellen Davis



Couples relish the exquisite setting, service, and food. Business executives find that the leisurely dining establishment is perfect for sealing deals.



and Fiji to get pointers. "I thought, 'What do you do with a Queen?'" he says. As it turned out, the pampering treatment that's always in place at McNinch House aptly fit royal protocol.

"When the doorbell rings, we all go on stage," says Ellen. She or Greg greets guests, inviting them into the parlor for a before-dinner beverage, followed by a brief history of the house. "This is like a Broadway production. We want the same atmosphere every time we open the door—a nice, genteel, Southern, relaxed, and very comfortable dinner."

And just like a final curtain call, the audience often breaks into applause when Ellen joins them during the course of their feast. If she can't break away from the kitchen, they'll often visit her there to say thanks in person. Some even write notes of appreciation. "It's like having people come to your home," she says.

Nancy Dorman-Hickson

DINING AT MCNINCH

McNinch House is located at 511 North Church Street in Charlotte. Call (704) 332-6159 for reservations. Dinner is served Tuesday-Saturday. During December, the restaurant is open nightly. Fixed price is \$85 per person plus bar bill, tax, and tip.

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