

Every detail is perfect at Bedminster's Pluckemin Inn

by Cody Kendall, For The Star-Ledger

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SAED HINDASH/THE STAR-LEDGER

The main dining room of the Pluckemin Inn in Bedminster features a glass tower that shows off many of the wines the restaurant offers. The restaurant stocks about 10,000 bottles of wine.

*The Pluckemin Inn, 359 Route 202-206 South, Bedminster.
Lunch: 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Mondays-Fridays (Plucky Tavern
section). Dinner: 5:30-10 p.m. Mondays-Fridays, 5-10 p.m.
Saturdays. Closed Sundays. Full bar. Major credit cards. Casual
dress. Wheelchair accessible. Reservations recommended: (908)*

658-9292. www.pluckemininn.com.

FOUR STARS

The Pluckemin Inn is everything a fine dining restaurant should be in the 21st century.

The food is updated and fascinating, but not outrageous. Hospitality is sensational -- guests truly feel welcomed, and those who return will find their preferences have been noted. Impeccably trained staffers are helpful, never snobbish. Their mission is to serve, not intimidate. In our experience, every question, no matter what level of expertise it required, was answered promptly, accurately and with respect.

The atmosphere is relaxed because the patrons are, too. The inn doesn't have a dress code, so guests can wear anything that's comfortable for them as they sink into cushiony chairs and banquettes.

In short, there's nothing pretentious about this place, yet every detail is perfect. Most main courses are available in two sizes, so they can be tailored to a guest's appetite and budget. Window shades are raised only high enough for visitors to see the lawn, rather than the highway or shopping center across the street. Is the room temperature too chilly? A shawl will be offered. Did you forget your glasses? Reading glasses in various strengths are available.

The Federalist-style building is lined with reclaimed French oak and brick archways. The lure of outdoor dining in summer on the patio soon will be replaced by the equally attractive prospect of blazing fireplaces that add a cozy note on a crisp evening.

The restaurant was opened by owners Gloria and Carl LaGrassa to raves in the spring of 2005. They have assembled a dedicated team, with Tal Itzhaki as director of operations and Ramon Manalo overseeing the service. Matthew Levin was the original executive chef, but after he departed for a job in Philadelphia, David Felton took over last year. Felton was involved opening New York City's Biltmore Room and has taught at the Natural Gourmet Institute of Health and Culinary Arts in Manhattan.

While Levin's approach leaned toward the international, Felton is more focused on fresh ingredients from the area. Lettuce and tomatoes grown at Three Meadows Farm on nearby Burnt Mills Road are featured in several salads, including the beautifully assembled panzanella and smoked blue cheese (\$13). Local chicken (\$28) is roasted and revved up with chorizo, a flash of piquillo peppers and aged dry sherry.

The talented Felton, who has a light but definite touch, also isn't afraid to go further afield. Wild Alaskan salmon (\$19 for a small plate, \$28 for a regular entree) is served with three contrasting vegetable tastes; the licorice aura of fennel, the tang of raw tomato sauce and the soft mellowness of Japanese eggplant.

The menu is divided into four courses and dessert, though the number of courses you order is optional. The entree small plates make it possible to have a banquet without feeling either overtaxed or stuffed. To avoid the latter sensation, however, it's best to go easy on the breadsticks. Baked on the premises, these spicy twists with specks of sage and notes of Parmesan cheese are a tempting overindulgence.

There's always a small complimentary appetizer from the chef. One of the most interesting we tried was the little "soda" flavored by Three Meadows farm peaches and rhubarb, enhanced with a tiny piece of pickled watermelon rind. It was not too fizzy; fun and refreshing, certainly a different way to start the meal.

The evenings are well-paced, but you'll have time for one of the restaurant's unusual cocktails. The Xoctl (\$12) essentially is a margarita made with pear liqueur and puree, as well as lime juice. A smattering of Mexican spiced salt runs along the rim. Bubbling Brown Sugar (\$10) is "a Caribbean take on the champagne cocktail," with homemade dark ginger syrup, peach and orange bitters jazzing up a glass of blanc de noirs.

First course offerings include a half-dozen oysters (\$21), some topped with Osetra caviar; others with little beads of a cucumber/lychee combination. A tasting of "sustainable" caviars (\$15), taken from farm-raised fish so there's no damage to the environment, include smoked salmon eggs, white sturgeon eggs and salmon eggs marinated in bourbon and sake, served atop

warm petite potato pancakes with cool creme fraiche as an accent. For an Asian note, there's yellowfin tuna sashimi and tartare (\$15), served with summer truffle and ponzu sauce, each melodiously hitting different areas of the palate.

The second-course items tend to be a shade more complicated. The hand-cut pasta (\$12), delicate as chiffon, evolves into a passionate dish with the addition of wild and farmed mushrooms, layers of intricate flavors working their dark magic in the company of black olives and arugula. Six lemongrass-steamed shrimp (\$15) are brightened, but not overpowered, by the essence of kaffir lime and coconut, a delicate yin and yang.

The smooth gazpacho (\$12) with a king crab timbale and the drama of yellow and red tomatoes is the only soup available at the moment, but it brings back memories of the summer that has just left us.

For the third course, which is all seafood, try the Maryland striped bass (\$20/\$33), so crispy-skinned, paired with crayfish in a brilliant red shell and golden rice. The miso-marinated broiled black cod (\$34) gets its horizons expanded by Japanese pickles, while a web of crispy potatoes provides the contrast.

The fourth course, all meat and fowl, includes free-range bison with roasted shallots, rosti potato and pasilla chiles (\$28/\$40). There's a daring Moroccan-spiced rack of lamb (\$28/\$40), with dates, green mango and pistachio couscous all offering exotic flair.

Brian Hider, the skilled sommelier and co-director who has been on hand since the restaurant debuted, is available to make suggestions about the wine. His services come in handy, considering the complexity of the menu and the fact that there are 10,000 bottles reposing in the three-story glass tower that runs through the center of the dining rooms. Wine prices cover a wide range. Should you want to spend thousands of dollars on a rare French offering, or just \$610 for the 2002 Bryant Family Vineyard Cabernet Sauvignon from California, you're in luck. But there are many bottles for more modest costs and a good number of choices by the glass, such as the Columbia Crest Cabernet Sauvignon (\$8).

Joseph Gabriel remains as pastry chef. His desserts bring the meal to a delicious crescendo with the sparkle of the cinnamon and

panko-crusted apple strudel (\$11) or the rainbow array of house-made seasonal ice creams or sorbets (\$10), with such unusual flavors as sweet corn and lychee.

There's also a dessert "bouche," (\$12) with a tasting of three desserts on one plate. I recommend the Bing cherry crumble with champagne sabayon, the chocolate and lavender pot de creme and the caramel gateau with molasses gelee and cocoa nib tuile. As if all this weren't enough, you'll be sent on your way with complimentary cookies.

For lunch or casual dining, head for the informal Plucky Tavern, which is to the left as you enter. You can order from the regular dining room menu there, or try selections from a lighter tavern menu. The restaurant is designed so that the noise from the tavern's TVs can't be heard down the hall in the main dining room, where a thread of light jazz is unobtrusive and the noise level is negligible due to the sound-proofed ceiling.

How many times can I say "amazing" in one evening? I forgot to count. Wherever you live in New Jersey, or beyond, the Pluckemin Inn is a worthy destination.

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