

JULY 11-17, 2005

**TABLE
TALK**

by Bob Lape



COMFORTABLE DINING: Pluckemin, in Bedminster, N.J., was designed as a 10,000-square-foot re-creation of an 1890s Federalist farmhouse inn with wine country accents.

New inn spot shines in Jersey

Contemporary cuisine, many wines star at casual Pluckemin; early glitches

BY BOB LAPE

WHEN A GUEST at the astonishing new Pluckemin Inn in Bedminster, N.J., remarked on being chilly, she was immediately invited to select from a basket of pashmina scarves in different colors. She chose one that matched her dress.

When patrons asked about the inn's three-story wine tower, sommelier/beverage director Brian Hider proudly escorted them into the cellars to display prize bottles from hearse Doris Duke's estate. Care for a 1934 Domaine de la Romanée-Conti Monopole for \$16,000? The '29 Y'quem is a few thousand less.

Shades of Alain Ducasse? Not at all. Owner Carl LaGrassa and his wife, Gloria, retired to the country after 30 years of yo-yoing between TriBeCa and Bedminster. Fans of Montrachet and Bouley, they decided to create something to let others in on their passion for fine food and wine in comfortable yet casual surroundings. Pluckemin Inn, the re-

sult, is the most exciting dining experience to hit central Jersey in 10 years.

DAS Architects of Philadelphia designed the 10,000-square-foot re-creation of an 1890s Federalist farmhouse inn with wine country accents. Walls are of reclaimed French oak, and the 15,000-bottle wine trove is showcased in glass-encased racks rising through the center of the building.

The impressive Pluckemin team includes Mr. Hider and operations director Terry Ward, who led Stephen Starr restaurants in Philadelphia and those of Todd English in Boston. Executive chef Matthew Levin and pastry chef Joseph Gabriel, both Aureole vets, bring vibrant innovation and artful style to contemporary cuisine composed of the finest ingredients available. The world is their oyster, supply-wise.

Pristine oysters from three continents join clams, crab and crawfish—barnacles, too—in chef Levin's opening volley of individually sauced sea creatures. Other starters (\$7 to \$19) include a dazzling take on broiled hamachi "in textures." This means tartare with fresh wasabi-infused to-biko, barbecued loin, and braised collar with scallions. Avocado ice cream, green apple dashi soup and an edible orchid complete the picture. Matthew's Salad is a mellow medley of butter lettuce, spicy cashews, Asian pears and Maytag Blue cheese tossed with honey-black sesame vinaigrette.

A crispy *brik* of halibut—wrapped in thin pastry crust—is superb, perfumed with kaffir lime and accessorized with lump crabmeat fondant and snow pea leaves. Pickled ginger, coconut and Thai basil send roasted black sea bass in a delicious Southeast Asian direction. Wild king salmon is done *a la plancha* with house-cured gravlax and roasted peach granité as counterpoint.

From the grill come New York strip steaks, rib eyes, seven-rib lamb chops and 20-ounce veal chops, presented with roasted shallots and house-made bacon in a sage-and-Madeira sauce. Side dishes (\$6) are exceptional, especially asparagus risotto, beautifully seasoned onion strings, and braised wild mushrooms with horseradish and crème fraîche.

Pâtissier Gabriel shows a fun side early in his carrot cake sorbet intermezzo. Later, he effectively blends black pepper, thyme, sage and tarragon into a series of sweets that thrill the palate. Panko-crust ed apple strudel is puddled with warm caramel and paired with cinnamon honeycomb ice cream. Outrageous!

Early-days glitches: Assertive Spanish mint overwhelmed sweet spring pea soup with steamed crabmeat; diver scallops were sandy and more than a bit sweet in combination with smoked banana purée and evaporated Guinness Stout.

A spastic sound system produced jolting volumes from time to time.

The wine pairings are top-notch, and the best news about the huge wine cache is that prices are very reasonable. ■



THE PLUCKEMIN INN
359 Route 202/206
Bedminster, N.J.
(908) 658-9292
★ ★ ★ ½

CUISINE: Contemporary American
WINES: 1,126 choices, 45 by the glass
DRESS: No code
NOISE LEVEL: Moderate
PRICE RANGE: \$26-\$50
WINE MARKUP: 50%-100%
CREDIT CARDS: All major
RESERVATIONS: Recommended
HOURS: Dinner, Mon.-Sat., 5-10 p.m., closed Sun.
★ ★ ★ ★ = Outstanding
★ ★ ★ = Excellent
★ ★ = Very good
★ = Good