

Sunday Star-Ledger

MAY 29, 2005

DINING OUT

New Pluckemin Inn is a fabulous success

FINE DINING

Pluckemin Inn

359 Route 202-206 South, Bedminster. Dinner: 5-10 p.m. Tuesdays-Thursdays, 5-11 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays. Full bar. Major credit cards. Smoking only in lounge. Casual dress. Wheelchair accessible. Reservations recommended: (908) 658-9292.

★★★★

BY CODY KENDALL
FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

The new Pluckemin Inn is stunning in every way. Built in Federalist style, the 10,000-square-foot structure's centerpiece is a three-story, glass-sided wine tower filled with 15,000 bottles, the most expensive of which is \$16,260 for the 1934 Romane-Conti Monopole purchased from the estate of local heiress Doris Duke.

The building has many other eye-catching features, from the reclaimed French oak on the walls to the stone floors, brick archways, massive fireplaces and the terrace next to the bar. What really got my attention, however, was the Japanese hamachi in three textures with avocado ice cream (\$14), not to mention the Maine halibut (\$29), dressed to impress with jumbo lump crab fondant, snow pea leaves and kaffir lime. I tend to go glassy-eyed when faced with a dessert menu that features the same old molten chocolate cake, so a sweet and savory tarragon and black peppercorn panna cotta (\$9) with strawberry rhubarb sorbet made quite an impression.

Such original thinking is standard procedure at the inn. Chef Matthew Levin, a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, perfected his craft in the kitchens of a number of restaurants, including Philadelphia's Le Bec-Fin and closer to home, the Ryland Inn in Whitehouse. Most recently, he began a buzz as the chef of Moonlight in New Hope, Pa. His work meshes seamlessly with that of pastry chef Joseph Gabriel, who apprenticed at Aureole during his college days in New York, went on to attend the New England Culinary Institute and worked at Petrossian in Las Vegas. The inn, which debuted this spring, is another creation of Gloria and Carl LaGrassa, the founders last year of the striking Italian restaurant, Ocino, in Warren County.



Diners enjoy the ambience, and the extensive wine collection, at the all-new Pluckemin Inn in Bedminster. The restaurant's wine list draws from a collection of 15,000 bottles, including one available for just \$16,260.

PHOTOS BY GEORGE MANSHI/THE STAR-LEDGER

The couple researched their productions by dining in Europe and around the United States while they were previously employed in the brokerage services industry. Their director of operations, Terry Ward, who also opened Ocino, has held the same post with restaurant groups in Philadelphia, San Francisco and Boston. Beverage director/sommelier Brian Hider previously was at the nearby Tewksbury Inn, where he compiled an award-winning wine list.

The Pluckemin Inn certainly is ambitious, but the groundwork and the right staffing assured instant success. Judging by the well-filled dining room and tavern on a recent weekend, word about the inn is getting out, even though it's only been going for a few weeks.

Staff is impressively well trained, and they had a lot to learn. How many waiters have you encountered who can explain fregola sarda, tataki of Kobe, Suzuki and cocoa nibs? Practically every dish has a distinctive twist, whether it's the little pile of powdered pistachio nuts that go with the sauteed Hudson Valley foie gras over sour cherries (\$19), the smoked banana puree delivering texture atop the roasted diver scallops (\$15) or the pork belly adjacent to the caramelized veal chop (\$33). That's also



The work of executive chef Matthew Levin, above, is a perfect match with the creations of pastry chef Joseph Gabriel, right. Both have extensive experience and bring interesting ideas to the table.

the entree that includes the fregola sarda, which turned out to be pasta dots.

The cocoa nibs, the essence of chocolate in the form of bits of roasted cocoa beans, enhanced the flavor of a prime, dry-aged New York sirloin strip steak (\$42). We're not talking Hershey's kisses here; this is an element that's deep and dark, underscoring the taste of the beef and the morel mushrooms that came with it.

Suzuki (\$33), or Japanese sea bass, took on the aura of smoked peppers, softened by a rich vanilla/

walnut onion sauce. Tataki of Kobe (\$19) is the famous Japanese beef seared on four sides, with a cold center, served with anchovy essence and peanut salad, quite an appetizer.

But the one starter you must have is the Japanese hamachi (yellowtail) a fish served "in textures:" tartar style, chopped and raw; broiled and fried. It came with the avocado ice cream that seemed more like a non-spicy guacamole than a frozen treat, and a green apple dipping sauce, which added a tang to all the per-



sonalities of the fish.

Side dishes (\$6) are not necessary (there's plenty on the plate of every main course) but they're fun. The most unusual are roasted shalots with house-smoked bacon and sage, or braised wild mushrooms with slivers of horseradish root and crème fraiche, but you can also get a Yukon gold potato puree if you have a down-to-earth craving.

The Doris Duke wine notwithstanding, there are a great many reasonably priced bottles at the inn. Part of the massive list includes a category of 100 wines for

\$50 or less, with interesting possibilities below \$30. Wines by the glass start at \$6 and go up to \$20.

Desserts are so beguiling and different that they'll make your head spin; you'll want them all. The chocolate "timeline" (\$12) included Aztec frozen hot chocolate, complete with a homemade marshmallow; an intense chocolate bombe and a caramel tart flavored with sesame. Pink French macaroons (\$11) topped a smooth Meyer lemon tart, smartly paired with rough-textured lemon/thyme cassis granite.

Then have an exotic tea (\$4) such as pear/caramel, to finish things off. To help you decide, samples of the teas are presented in neatly corked glass tubes so you can sniff them before ordering.

Dinner was an unhurried delight from the made-in-house cheese/herb breadsticks at the beginning of the meal to the complimentary signature chocolates (how about a white chocolate-dipped gooseberry?) post-dessert.

The lone distracting note was the jarring music. One minute it was Mozart; the next we were back in the '70s with "Hooked on a Feeling." From that brief description, it's obvious that it was all over the musical map. Something soothing would aid the digestion and be more in character with the inn's elegant informality, which dispenses with a dress code. On the other side of the inn from the dining room is a tavern, "The Plucky," which was the nickname of the old Pluckemin Inn bar demolished last year to make way for the restaurant. If you can't handle the prices in the dining room, which range up to \$49 for a 20-ounce rib eye or a 20-ounce veal chop, try the tavern. It has its own menu, featuring a raw bar and a limited number of items starting at \$7 for a salad to \$12 for Korean-style baby back ribs.

More than a decade ago, I had a brief encounter with the original down-at-the-heels Plucky. I found I needed some tequila to mix into a barbecue sauce, and couldn't find a liquor store nearby that was open on a Sunday evening. So I walked into the Plucky, looked neither left nor right, and bravely asked for a bottle to go. As I headed toward the door clutching my Cuervo Gold, one of the bleary-eyed denizens of the bar looked up and advised, "If that don't work, call me." I fled, never to return to that spot. Or so I thought.

Now I can't wait to go back to the very same location and have another memorable dinner at the remarkable new Pluckemin Inn.

Cody Kendall can be reached via e-mail at CodyDine@netscape.net.