



New Jersey Life  
December 2005

PLUCKEMIN INN  
359 Route 202/206 South, Bedminster, NJ 07921  
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### **3 and 1/2 stars** By Anthony Giglio

For the last 30 years, Carl and Gloria LaGrassa, a pair of *bons vivants*, have split their time between their New Jersey house and a cozy *piéd-à-terre* in Manhattan. They retired, moving to what used to be their country home in Bedminster. But they no sooner settled in when Carl started itching to build a long-dreamed-of restaurant: a casual-yet-elegant spot where people could enjoy great wine (he's a collector) and dine on food prepared in modern and exciting way. In April the former financier opened the Pluckemin Inn.

The restaurant occupies the same space where the original inn of the same name, originally founded in the 1830s, once welcomed guests. Over time it had slipped into incarnations as a local watering hole and even, gasp, a gas station.

Painstakingly reconstructed in the Federal style by the architectural firm DAS of Philadelphia, the inn now captures the essence of California's wine country. It features French oak accents, rusticated metals, stone floors, brick archways, and a magnificent staircase made to appear as if it's floating, not fastened to the walls or floor. The walls have been painted amber, to conjure the sunny tones of the Napa Valley. Fittingly, the focal point of both dining rooms is a stunning three-story glass wine tower that boasts some 15,000 bottles.

In the kitchen is executive chef Matthew Levin, a Culinary Institute of America grad who has worked at Aureole in New York City; Le Bec-Fin, Brasserie Perrier, and Striped Bass in Philadelphia; and the Ryland Inn. His menu is American, with subtle Latin and Asian accents for good measure. Case in point: *Tataki* of American Kobe beef, nearly blackened outside but pink within, bathed gingerly in anchovy essence. Japanese yellowtail tuna was served in three textures: raw sashimi, glistening tartare, and broiled with a potent ponzu lacquer. One was more fabulous than the other. Next came more quasi-raw fish, via three delicious *seviches*: domestic abalone, Japanese *hiramasa*, and Australian *barramundi*.

Levin gambled with a starter of roasted diver scallops topped - I thought incongruously - with a floret of smoked banana puree and a drizzle of evaporated Guinness Stout, but it worked beautifully. (Then again, I've never smoked a banana or evaporated stout before.) The banana took on the flavor of a perfectly ripe plantain, and the syrup was wonderfully bitter; together, they magnified the caramelized sweetness of the scallops.

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I had no doubt that the sautéed Hudson Valley foie gras with sour cherries, pistachio powder, and port glaze would be wonderful. It was.

Main courses followed suit with the same strength. A "brik" - the menu's label for a brick-shaped slab - of Maine halibut, roasted juicily, came splashed with a bright kaffir-lime sauce. A magnificently roasted black sea bass, flanked by tiny scallop-stuffed dumplings, was infused with pungent, mouth-watering galangal. Meats measured in manly portions included a 24-ounce prime bone-in rib eye chop of Flintsonian proportions and equally big flavor, served with bone marrow and house-made shallot sauce on the side (thankfully, as I prefer a good cut of beef simply salted). The 20-ounce veal chop roasted with chanterelles and cipollini onions, however, was the table favorite, flavored fabulously with an intense veal demi-glace.

Pastry chef Joseph Gabriel's desserts were a tad overwrought and far too cerebral after a few glasses of wine (more on that in a minute). Take, for example, ChocolateA "Timeline" of Old and New World. Really - that's the name of the dessert. It included, with no explanation whatsoever, a tasty Aztec frozen hot cocoa (which I assume means it was hot when it was shoved in the freezer), a bombe made with Manjari chocolate from Madagascar, and a tooth-achingly sweet sesame-caramel tart. I'll pass on ChocolateThe Next 100 Years. A spiced cake decorated with candied coconut and carrots (!) was just plain weird. But the almond shortcake with golden raspberries and a mixed berry sage sorbet was interesting, although the chopped sage pushed it over the top.

Finally, a word on sommelier Brian Hider's wine list. While it greatly covers all the bases and price points contained in that gorgeous tower, kudos to him and the LaGrassas for putting "The Pluckemin 100" up front, all of them less than \$50 and "chosen for their approachability, value, and appeal with our menu." Talk about truth in advertising.

(End.)