

The Pluckemin Inn review: Not fancy, just first-rate

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The organic salmon with local asparagus, Parmesan and morel mushrooms at the Pluckemin Inn.

Photo: Joe Proudman, The Star-Ledger

FOUR STARS

From the moment you walk into the Pluckemin Inn, it's obvious that this restaurant is all about customer comfort.

That's the way it should be everywhere. But how many times have you been to a restaurant where your entrance seemed to be viewed as an intrusion, or no one was available to greet you?

The inn located in Bedminster makes it a priority to treat patrons like friends, walking the line without being too familiar. The reception is warm and immediate; you don't have to look around desperately to figure out who can seat you. There's even a cozy waiting area — a place to relax while the rest of your party catches up with you.

When you've visited more than once, your preferences are noted. Service is responsive, rather than reactive. Did you forget your glasses? Magnifying specs are available — just another one of the nice touches that make this place so special.

The price range also is tailored to put you at ease. There are plenty of higher-end dishes, some of which are available both as small plates and large plates. This enables patrons to try several dishes if they please, or to economize by eating less. Whether that's a satisfying amount depends on the individual. I find with an appetizer, a small-portion entree and a dessert, I'm happy.

The inn has a tavern, the Plucky, which is well-separated from the dining room. That means the sports crowd can cheer and moan as the game plays out on TV without disturbing serious eating. But several standards served at the Plucky, including fancy burgers (\$16) and a pizzette (\$14), also are available in the dining room (conversely, the dining room menu, not including the multi-course tasting menu, is available in the Plucky).

While nothing about the food is forced or contrived, some items require explanation. The sunchoke soup (\$13), for instance, or the mangalitsa guanciale with botarga (\$17). And what about the Griggstown chicken coupled with spring vegetables and pistachio pistou (\$29)? No worries, the staffers are well-informed. Ask, and you'll get an answer that's easy to understand.

A sunchoke is a Jerusalem artichoke, a member of the sunflower family. Of course, it doesn't stand alone in the soup, but is merely a mellow member of an ensemble that includes a bevy of compatible players: wild mushroom, chestnut (always my favorite in any dish), red wine-braised walnuts and brioche.

Mangalitsa is a Hungarian pig whose products are "in" at big-name restaurants; guanciale is a bacon made from pig jowls. Botarga is cured fish roe, sometimes called "poor man's caviar." It is all showcased with risotto and asparagus. And pistou? That's simply Provence's answer to Italy's pesto.

It's not so complicated when you have good guides, and those at the inn won't let you get lost. Most of the time, however, you can figure things out for yourself.

What could be more straightforward than a huge beet salad with strawberries, pistachios and goat cheese (\$15)? Or organic salmon with tender local asparagus, Parmesan and heady morel mushrooms (\$17/\$32). Or the most expensive item on the menu: a New York strip steak with Béarnaise (\$45) accompanied by asparagus, arugula pesto and thick-cut fries.

Chef Juan José Cuevas doesn't contort his food just to be different. He's from the locavore school of cooking, which means he likes to buy ingredients locally as much as he can. In this case, that often means Three Meadows Farm in the township. For other items, he goes to the farmers' market at Union Square in Manhattan.

Flavors stand up and sparkle for Cuevas, whose impressive résumé includes stints at Lespinasse and Alain Ducasse, when it was at the Essex House.

He ensures that the eye-appeal quotient is high. The colorful lobster salad (\$18), for instance, is beautiful enough to serve as a centerpiece, tumbled with mussels and dotted with radish slices, combined with farro. Preserved lemon and smoked caviar add several other notes to the clever scale embodied in this dish.

The wine list is vast and varied, but it's particularly nice that there has been no stinting on the wines by the glass. You'll find something there that is quite special rather than the ho-hum choices we often see elsewhere in this category.

Excitement reigns when it's time for dessert. The work of longtime inn employee Joseph Gabriel is infinitely intriguing. He seamlessly carries through on Cuevas' efforts with creations of delightful complexity.

The Valrhona chocolate Napoleon (\$12) is pure chocolate silk layered with subtle pastry. A strawberry, cassis and rhubarb vacherin (\$11) takes three fruit flavors and conducts them in a spring symphony that gets its texture from pristine meringue rings.

Sorbets and ice creams (\$9), made in-house, are simply delectable and part of an ever-changing rainbow that might include carrot sorbet or cinnamon honey ice cream. Mix and match at will.

The atmosphere is exemplary in the dining room, with well-spaced tables and chairs geared to easy sitting. Best of all, it's not noisy. You can actually talk in a normal voice and hear what everyone at your table is saying.

The restaurant was founded six years ago by Gloria LaGrassa and her late husband, Carl. She has continued to pursue their business and their dream.

The inn has evolved nicely by virtue of a sensible mantra — listening to the guests to see what they want. “We never forget that they are why we are here,” said general manager Tal Itzhaki. And there you have one of the inn's many keys to success.

The Pluckemin Inn

Route 206 South and 10 Pluckemin Way, Bedminster.

(908) 658-9292,

www.pluckemininn.com

Hours: 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Mondays-Fridays,

5:30-9 p.m. Mondays-Tuesdays,

5:30-10 p.m. Wednesdays-Fridays,

5-10 p.m. Saturdays,

5-8 p.m. Sundays.