

April 13, 2008

DINING | BEDMINSTER

In the Vanguard, a Place That's Fussy and Fresh

By [KARLA COOK](#)

IN the culinary fog of good (but not great) restaurants in central [New Jersey](#), I was inordinately pleased to find the equivalent of a bright summer day with a light breeze. That beautiful day is the Pluckemin Inn, where the ingredients are carefully sourced and assembled and the service is equally thoughtful.

Consider, for example, an appetizer salad: thin ovals of hearts of palm, avocado, cardamom-candied peanuts, mâche and coriander, all cloaked with a light chili-lime vinaigrette featuring dried peppers that were grown last summer in the restaurant's [garden](#).

Or the main dish of grilled octopus with piquillo peppers, chorizo, a sprinkling of cranberry beans from the Santa Monica Farmers' Market (some 3,000 miles away), and the mildly piquant leaves of baby arugula from Three Meadows Farm (three miles away, on Burnt Mills Road).

Then there are the pillow boosters discreetly offered to diners who find themselves sinking into the sofa seating that lines the wall. And, in the sweetest touch of all, the tray of reading glasses in the hallway leading to the dining room, lenses catching the light as we walk by.

The Pluckemin Inn is both indulgent and in the vanguard. It is a spot of utopia with mostly persnickety standards.

Outside, the building evokes the colonial Northeast. Like many historic houses, it looks as if it has gradually lost its front yard to an ever-expanding highway; there is only a scrap of green separating it from a busy road. Walk inside, however, and the notion of age fades.

Carl and Gloria LaGrassa, the owners, built the place and opened the 130-seat restaurant in April 2005. They hired David Felton, a 1998 graduate of Johnson & Wales University, as sous chef in January 2006; he became executive chef six months later.

The menu is short, but needs explanations that would be better on a printed page than delivered by the server. On the right is a straightforward tasting menu. On the left, the listings are divided into four categories, with some items available for two different prices. For a tasting-style menu, choose one of the smaller portions from each category. For a traditional meal, pick an appetizer

from one of the first two categories, and a main dish from one of the second two. The larger portion will most likely satisfy all but a gourmand's appetite.

Of the appetizers tried, standouts included the tuna crudo with its apple-olive oil sorbet; the roasted and raw beet salad with Coach Farm goat cheese; the heart of palm salad; the lemon grass steamed shrimp in a soup of coconut milk flavored with kaffir lime; and the bacon-wrapped pan-roasted Griggstown quail with chicken liver, an aerated chestnut and potato purée and pickled and dehydrated cabbage.

As for the main dishes tried, a favorite beyond the grilled octopus was an interpretation of the classic Jean-Georges pan-seared scallop dish with caramelized cauliflower, caper-raisin sauce and lobster foam, using Barnegat Light diver scallops, which Mr. Felton discovered while working as executive chef at Blue, in Surf City. Other standouts included the Durock pork tenderloin marinated in guajillo maple syrup, pan-roasted and served with stewed plums and brussels sprouts (though the cheese dumplings were out of place and mediocre). Every bite of the pan-roasted Piedmontese rib-eye was luscious and fork-tender.

That was not the case with the \$46 corn-fed, pan-roasted, dry-aged Niman Ranch New York strip steak, which had an unpleasantly thick moat of fat and gristle protecting the meat. And another complaint: Given nutritional concerns and the simple notion of a balanced meal, it is ridiculous to pay extra for a green vegetable.

Desserts, made by Joseph Gabriel, were anything but lonesome on the plate. Besides the superlative strawberry-rhubarb sorbet accompanying the creamy farmer cheesecake, consider his Valrhona Tainori Grand Cru chocolate pot de crème with cocoa nibs and sea salt, alongside a blend of mango and pineapple cooked with kaffir lime, lemon grass and pandan leaf. The pistachio baked Alaska came with a tumble of raspberries; the panko apple strudel, with cinnamon honey ice cream and warm caramel sauce. They, like the restaurant, are successful blends of the old, the reimagined and the new.

Pluckemin Inn

359 Route 202/206

Bedminster

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www.pluckemininn.com

EXCELLENT

THE SPACE Expansive restaurant with 130 seats over three floors. Completely wheelchair accessible.

THE CROWD Quiet and well heeled, with few children; servers are deferential and anticipatory.

THE BAR [Wine](#) list of more than 1,800 labels from around the world, ranging from a \$30 Riesling to a \$17,700 Burgundy, a 1934 Romanée-Conti Grand Cru. The "Pluckemin 100" list simplifies the choices to wines costing less than \$60.

THE BILL Lunch dishes, \$11 to \$22. Dinner entrees, \$18 (for a few of the small portions) to \$46 for dry-aged Niman Ranch sirloin strip steak. (All major credit cards accepted.)

WHAT WE LIKE Heart of palm salad, tuna crudo, bacon-wrapped quail, lemon grass shrimp, beet salad, octopus, Piedmontese beef rib-eye, orange Pekin duck, scallops, farmer cheesecake with strawberry-rhubarb sorbet, apple strudel, chocolate pot de crème.

IF YOU GO Lunch: Monday to Friday, 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. Dinner: Monday to Friday, 5:30 to 10 p.m.; Saturday, 5 to 10 p.m. and Sunday, 4 to 8 p.m. Reservations recommended on weekends, preferred at all times. Abundant parking.

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