

SUBURBAN ESSEX

MAGAZINE

DINING OUT...

Small in Size, Big in Flair

A Small Nutley Favorite Draws a Large Clientele

By Grace Russell

Photo by Dan Epstein

At The Petite Café, which originally was a very popular luncheon boutique, customers lobbied for evening hours, and they were ultimately successful. One of those little discoveries that make me relish what I do, The Petite Café fits into the “small gems” category, which is one I particularly enjoy.

Don't blink as you drive down Nutley's Franklin Avenue, or you might miss this small, 20-seat delight, and that would be a shame. Its original tin ceiling, cozy décor and open kitchen serve as a perfect setting to watch as co-owner and chef Keith Jaret effortlessly works the utensils while his wife Maureen cheerfully works the room. Keith, a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, worked at a number of wellknown Manhattan restaurants, but his years at Windows on the World are what he remembers most fondly. “That's where I learned it all,” he says.

“Take a step outside the ordinary,” proclaims the menu, and the evening's offerings confirm that declaration, beginning with the unusual creamy dipping sauce for the bread. The soothing \$5.95 soup du jour, Acorn Squash Bisque, served with chestnuts, was a delightful setup for a regal treat: luxurious Pan-fried Triple Cream Brie with raspberry amaretto vinaigrette, priced at \$8.50. Then followed a jolt of nostalgia: Ham Croquettes. My mother was the Croquette Queen of our neighborhood, and her croquettes were legendary. So I couldn't wait to try these \$7.50 babies, made with Spanish Serrano ham and pecorino cheese with chipolte mustard. As in my childhood, they were crispy on the outside, moist and creamy on the inside. Our last pleasurable appetizer, \$7.75 Shrimp, Sirloin and Chicken



Brochette, was tenderly prepared and dressed up Thai style.

Kicking off our entrees was a special of the evening, Braised Black Cod Matsaki, priced at \$24.95. This fine dish was especially recommended by Maureen, who described black cod as “a rich fish similar in consistency to sable and in flavor to sturgeon.” Served with vegetable-dotted

rice and a Korean teriyaki sauce enhanced with a chili pepper bite, the cod was as fabulous as Maureen promised. “Like no other fish,” she says.



Chef Keith Jaret’s culinary creations always make for a distinctive and enjoyable dining experience at The Petite Café.

Proving that The PetiteCafé's appeal is not limited to a certain clientele, the \$24.95 Angus Rib Eye Steak, served with the restaurant's signature “porcini martini” sauce, and the five-star \$19 Glazed Tournedos of beef, were robust and succulent dishes. “Cellar in the Sky” Shrimp, Keith Jaret's homage to his years at Windows on the World, was a simple and elegant \$19.95 dish featuring sautéed shrimp with fresh tomatoes, ginger, red onions, dill and chevre, a lovely melding of flavors and tastes. And how does a chef win a restaurant reviewer’s heart? By combining two favorite taste sensations, as in the \$18.25 Roast Duck Kir Royale, which is sautéed breast of duck with a champagne cassis sauce. The Petite Café has some interesting desserts, all priced at \$5.85. The chocolate layer cake was good, though not as decadent as implied on the menu, but the “Rock and Rye” liqueur cheesecake was delicious. The handsdown winner for both taste and interest was Forbidden Rice, an unusual rice pudding made from Chinese black rice, which has a slightly nutty flavor and consistency. Recently, Maureen and Keith created their own formula for wine-tasting dinners. Once a month (except for August and December), a maximum of 16 people meet in the restaurant, each with a reasonably priced ‘pre-assigned’ wine. With the tables joined together for good conversation, and with a \$50 dinner to enjoy, the evening is a great way to share a special time with friends.

Check their website for details.

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