

## DINING REVIEW

# Dining out: A special meal for a special occasion

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Columnist

While there are a half dozen Vero restaurants where beachside residents can on any given night enjoy an extremely fine dining experience, ever wonder what it would be like to visit one of these restaurants and have the chef prepare a special menu just for your party?

In fact, this is not an impossible dream. A couple of our favorite restaurants are willing to do this – obviously for a pretty stiff price -- if arrangements are made in advance.

And we got a look at the kind of experience one might expect – how it differs from simply going to a restaurant, and ordering the best of what they are offering that night – when we recently celebrated a special anniversary with a special dinner at the Citrus Grillhouse.

Actually, arrangements for this gastronomic treat were made as a surprise by our daughter in consultation with chef Scott Varricchio, who was waiting to greet us on the front steps of his Ocean Park restaurant when we arrived at the appointed hour.

Ushered to a corner table inside, we were told we would be enjoying four courses – each paired with an appropriate wine – and then special desserts.

The first course was Tournon of Foie Gras with poached fruits. While living in Europe, I can recall arguments over whether there was any better foie gras than that made from the livers of the ducks of the Gascony region of France, the Mecca of foie gras production.

So imagine my surprise to hear that the rich, luscious foie gras we were being served came from the livers of ducks from the Catskill Mountains in New York.

“They are poached in honey, orange zest, sugar, vanilla, Reisling, dried apricots and cranberries,” Varricchio told us. The Hudson Valley foie gras, served with poached fruit, a brioche crisp and the reduced liquid, was accompanied by a glass of Champagne. A decadent start to our meal.

For a second course, there were two different offerings. I was presented with a cheese ravioli in a tomato bacon broth. The filling of the ravioli was made from aged French Boucheron cut with goat cheese, cream cheese, fresh thyme leaves and olive oil, while the sauce was a combination of slow roasted roma tomatoes, bacon, chicken stock, garlic, fresh thyme and white wine.

While our daughter knew I love the Citrus Grillhouse’s ravioli, my husband was the winner on this course. He was

served linguini with pancetta, sweet onions, tomato and Parmesan cheese.

“This to me could be the best tasting item on my menu, and one of the best pasta dishes that I have ever had,” Varricchio said. My husband wouldn’t disagree.

For the third course, we were offered Roasted Soft Shell Crab in a sweet corn and bacon risotto. The soft shells from Maryland, among the first of the season, were served with a parmesan risotto bolstered with a little truffle butter. Sumptuous.

For the fourth course, our paths again diverged. I was treated to Montauk wild bass, where the skin had been scored, rubbed with a little butter and then pan seared skin side down until crispy. The bass was served with orzo seasoned with lemon zest and juice, and baby heirloom tomatoes dressed with lemon-thyme vinaigrette and micro celery.

While the seafood dish was excellent, my husband was again the big winner with an Imperial Wagyu New York Strip.

“This steak, from cattle born and raised in Ocala, is the first domestic product worthy of its lofty price,” Varricchio said. “Very few animals get to this grade of marbling. It truly is very special and something that is not always around. There is plenty of good steak, but this is about as good as there is to be had – anywhere.” The steak literally melted in your mouth.

To complete the meal, we were brought a roasted banana tart and house made ice cream. Turns out that ice cream is a particular source of pride for Varricchio.

“My ice creams are nothing more than milk, cream, sugar, eggs and in this case local organic strawberries from Osceola organic farm here in Vero,” he said. “But the process is unconventional. We use a Paco-Jet machine from Sweden. I make the ice cream base, freeze it, then spin it as needed so it takes a solid and turns it into ice cream, versus taking a liquid and turning it into a solid.”

Whatever the process, it tastes mighty fine. At last, going on three hours after we started, we pulled ourselves together and prepared to leave. It had indeed been a very special evening, and Varricchio said he is willing to plan and prepare similar dinners for others upon request.

The regular restaurant reviews you have come to expect in this column will resume next week. But if you have stories of a very special dinner prepared for you by other restaurants, please send them to me at [tina@verobeach32963.com](mailto:tina@verobeach32963.com), and we will share highlights in a future column. ■



Tournon of foie gras with poached fruit and a Reisling glaze. Photos by Tom McCarthy Jr.



Citrus scented crab and avocado with Indian River Ruby Grapefruit.



Panna cotta semifreddo.