

Interesting combinations yield innovation at Vita Restaurant & Bar

Posted by [moshinsk](#) June 19, 2009 16:45PM



ARISTIDE

ECONOMOPOULOS The Vita Restaurant & Bar, located in the Dolce Hotel in Basking Ridge.

You've heard of new American cuisine; now there's neo-American.

As defined by chef Paul Bogardus at Vita, the stylish restaurant in the equally sleek Dolce Hotel, the concept goes this way: "We use the region's freshest ingredients, organic whenever possible, to create innovative takes on classic dishes."

The inspiration is global, heavy on Asian stimulation, as it involves favorite elements combined in new ways. Pair Japanese with Italian, and what do you get? Tempura house-made mozzarella roulade (\$10), lightly fried mozzarella with shaved prosciutto and an oven-dried Roma tomato puree. It's a pleasant concept. Combine Carolina with Chinese for a pulled-pork won ton (\$10.50), glazed with sherry vinegar, then team these components with blue cheese slaw for definition. It's not so strange, when you think about it. Pork is a Chinese favorite, so why not just shred it and put it in a won ton, though in this case, it was more like a phyllo turnover.

If you're not wary of a pork overdose and yearn for another touch of the South, an appropriate entree would be the braised turkey thigh and pork belly confit (\$18) with creamy sun-dried blueberry grits. But wait, there's more. A bourbon and mustard-brined pan-seared pork tenderloin (\$19) had a counterpoint of tangy pears. In this one, though, we found the pork to be a little dry.

We preferred the roasted Asian barbecued "char siu" chicken breast (\$19), united with warm wilted rice, wine-glazed Savoy cabbage and a sweet potato salad for a refreshing take on a favorite summer dish.

As you've probably gathered by now, everything served at Vita has a twist. Bogardus, whose credentials include the Grand Cafe in Morristown and the Bernards Inn in Bernardsville, is assisted in the kitchen by Tony Torres and Tim Matz. They obviously are working hard to make Vita a chic casual destination for those seeking something different.

In that vein, a nifty starter is the grilled Romaine salad (\$9), which also appropriately features smoked gouda along with grilled chorizo and a creamy roasted bacon and garlic dressing. Although the ingredients seem to suggest a smoke overdose, happily that is not the case; this salad is fun.

A light touch is evident when necessary as well. The crispy-skinned rainbow trout (\$20) had just a suggestion of other flavors from a well-modulated grapefruit shallot vinaigrette that enhanced the warm avocado/Portobello mushroom/spinach salad on the plate.

The wine list offers enough possibilities at both boundaries of the spending spectrum, with several available for less than \$30 a bottle and a good selection at the upper end as well. Wine by the glass starts at \$6.50 for a decent house wine, Copperridge, which is geared to the restaurant market by E.J. Gallo Wineries. Each entree has a suggested wine complement (unfortunately spelled compliment on the menu) that is helpful, since some of the dishes are so unusual that they might stump patrons looking for a pairing if they didn't have this neat little cheat sheet. How do you select a vintage appropriate for the pork belly confit and grits, for instance? Not to worry. The restaurant suggests the 2007 Wolf Blass Yellow Label Shiraz (\$34). See how easy that was?

Oddly, the desserts seem pinned to a different price scale than the rest of the meal. I thought all the entrees were particularly reasonable. While the grilled New York sirloin with a caper/almond/shallot topping was the most expensive at \$24, six of the nine choices were \$20 or less, down to \$17 for the cavatelli with grilled ramps in a Chardonnay garlic sauce.

Desserts, on the other hand, included a raspberry lychee mousse bombe and coconut cheesecake streudel that were both \$9, which struck me as steep. The desserts certainly aspired to high style, but lacked a bit of the drama I expected and in the case of the disappointingly dry red velvet pecan cake (\$8.50), missed the mark.

Service lagged behind the food and decor. A bottle of beer arrived without a glass (the second time in a month this has happened to us at a high-end restaurant; I hope it's not a trend). When we asked for a glass, the server seemed astounded that anyone would want one, confiding that lots of people like to drink from the bottle. At the end of the evening, the staff seemed to disappear. It wasn't that I couldn't flag down anyone as I sought to get the check; they just vanished. I had to take a walk toward the kitchen before I was able to find someone to whom I could pass on an important message: I wanted to pay and go home.

Dolce is located in the former AT&T Learning Center. The restaurant has been artfully produced in cream, brown and gray, with occasional flame tones for an accent and golden globe light fixtures that work as eyecatchers. There are details at work here; the napkin rings, for example, are made of the same brushed nickel as the door handles, and little private dining rooms each have their own style. It's a plus to sit at one of the tables facing a lovely courtyard that has an Asian feel. There's also a fancy adjacent barroom, where the hours are 4-11:30 p.m. daily.

The restaurant, which opened last fall, offers a nice setting for its ambitious food. It felt a little impersonal; perhaps that was because the big room wasn't very crowded. Dolce is right off Route 287, but well-hidden, so it doesn't attract casual passersby. It's very convenient once you know it's there, however, and on a rainy night, the covered parking is just the ticket.

Cody Kendall may be reached at codydine@aim.com. For more dining reviews, go to nj.com/entertainment/dining.

Vita Restaurant and Bar

Dolce Hotel, 300 N. Maple Ave., Basking Ridge.

RATING: TWO AND A HALF STARS

Breakfast: 6:30-10:30 a.m. daily.

Lunch: 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m. daily.

Dinner: 6-9 p.m. daily. Full bar.

Major credit cards. Casual dress. Wheelchair accessible. Reservations: (908) 953-3003.

www.vitarestaurantandbar.com.

Categories: [Dining Review](#)

Comments

Footer