

TIMES-HERALD RECORD

845 SCENE

Restaurant review: Cucina in Woodstock

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For the Times Herald-Record

Published: 2:00 AM - 11/14/08

Our first dish, Roasted Butternut Squash With Ricotta Salada (\$12), sounds innocent enough. The squash are cut into hearty cubes, brown and crusty outside, amazingly light within. They arrive on an oval platter scattered with salty and savory Ricotta Salada, a pressed and dried ricotta cheese. Coated with a cider vinaigrette that embellishes rather than overwhelming the warm salad, the plate is finished with a shower of pepitas, roasted squash seeds. This simple blend of textures and flavors coalesces into a complex and satisfying appetizer.

The name of the restaurant, Cucina, in Woodstock, is also simple and straightforward, but only hints at the range and complexities of the dining experience here.

Cucina is housed in a large Victorian at the junction of Route 212 and Mill Hill Road. The exterior is all-American and old-fashioned, with a beautiful large porch for outside dining. Inside, the space is divided into a number of rooms. The bar is directly in front of you, classic, dark wood, large, warm and welcoming.

Rating

Decor: HHHH

Service: HHHH

Food: HHHH

Value: HHHH

Overall : HHHH

To the left is one dining room, but we're led to the right, where the main dining room is centered by a long communal table lit by a row of modish purple lights. Stylish bold wall sconces play off tall, narrow chairs. A line of banquettes, where we're sitting, lines one side of the room. Tables are solid blond wood, as is the floor. Fairly loud music fills the air and the sound level, helped by a rowdy group at the communal table, is high; this is not the place for a quiet romantic dinner. Still, the room feels modern and hip, a new place for the cool cognoscenti of Woodstock.

The menu is presented in an austere format, printed in small typeface with elementary, cryptic descriptions. It offers lots of options: small plates, salads, appetizers, pizzas, pastas and entrees, something for every taste and price point. There also is a small printed list of the evening specials on the table.

Our next appetizer features ricotta in another guise: Warm Ricotta With Shiitake and Oyster Mushrooms (\$12). A mound of silky warm ricotta sits next to three toasted wedges of bread. Dark brown shiitake and oyster mushrooms are sauteed with garlic and thyme and occupy their own small space on the plate. A kind of make-your-own pizza exercise — slather the bread with warm cheese and top with mushrooms — is an interactive exercise in enjoyment. Both the mild cheese and the mushrooms are a bit underseasoned, but the plate shines after a light shower of salt.

Entrees march along the same line of simple, creative food. From the specials list comes Risotto With Shrimp and Saffron (\$21). Risotto is one of the sternest tests of a restaurant's kitchen, especially seafood versions. The interpretation here is pure. The risotto is cooked beautifully, creamy with a satisfying bite from the rice. The texture is perfect, the rice congealed without being heavy. The mild flavor of saffron is lovely and rich; shrimp, just a tad springy, finish a lovely and hearty dish.

There are many versions of salmon in our world today: farmed, wild, organic and such. The salmon served here is delicious, whatever its label.

The dish, Slow Roasted Organic Salmon, Mashed Potatoes, Brussels Sprouts, Truffle Vinaigrette (\$23) is another simple description that contradicts the complexities of the dish. An incredibly moist and ethereal salmon (the secret is that it's roasted at a gentle 275 F.) sits atop a creamy mound of soothing mashed potatoes. Shredded brussels sprouts are strewn over the top, and the potatoes are ringed by the truffle vinaigrette. The dish achieves a level of enjoyment that surpasses the sum of its ingredients, cooking of the highest order.

Dessert is, thankfully, a selection of light sorbetto (\$5). Coconut is as rich a sorbet as you can conjure. Blood orange delivers a solid citrus flavor, and mango is a smooth and creamy delight.

With dinner we drink a Pinot Bianco from Laegeder (\$29). It is fertile and bright, with a nice hint of mineral from the northern Friuli region of Italy. We've been recognized, and our nervous waiter, and the rest of the service team here, do a fine job of impressing us. We're served a terrific bread basket at the beginning of our meal that has focaccia and tiny, long bread sticks that are positively addictive. When my date asks for a refill, the waiter arrives with an entire bread basket filled with the dainty delights.

Dinner is worth every penny, \$102 without tax and tip.

The group behind Cucina is an all-star team. Owners Lois Freedman and executive chef/owner Gianni Scappin are both veterans of some of the best restaurants in New York City. Manager Erin Winters and head chef Jesse Frederick both spent years honing their skills at GiGi's in Rhinebeck. It's little wonder this place is so good.

Cucina is a new restaurant in the Hudson Valley that will change the way you think about Italian cuisine. The simple but elegant food served here is first-rate. Service is excellent, and the room is a clean, bright and lively. Prices can be high, but this place offers lots of options for the budget-conscious, perfect considering the economy. This place is special and worth a trip. Go.

Cucina

Where: 109 Mill Hill Road, Woodstock

Phone: 679-9800

Web: www.cucinawoodstock.com

Entree price range: \$17-36

Hours/days: Brunch: 11:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m. Sat. and Sun.; dinner: 5-9:30 p.m. Tues.-Thurs., 5-10:30 p.m. Fri. and Sat., 5-9:30 p.m. Sun.

Children's menu: on request

Parking: substantial

Reservations: suggested

Full bar

Handicapped-accessible: yes

Low-fat/vegetarian menu: yes

Other amenities: takeout, catering and private parties

Signature dishes: Warm Shrimp, White Beans and Rosemary, Linguine With Porcini Mushrooms and Cream, Lamb Shank Braised in Red Wine

Credit cards: MasterCard, Visa, American Express