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Surf City restaurant is out of this world, yet down-to-earth

BY ANDREA CLURFELD • RESTAURANT CRITIC • AUGUST 12, 2007

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The food at Blue works the spectrum. If a plate is focusing on, for example, silky, juicy fresh sardines, there's also going to be the pebbly-crunchy pop of cornmeal, the penetrating pungency of mustard and the calming, freshening presence of parsley. If there's super-rich, luxurious foie gras, there's going to be a counterpointing play — right now, it's grapes in various stages of life, as sweet specimens, as must, as juice from puckering, not-yet-ripe fruit. If there's extreme, out-there succulence in sablefish, there's going to be the contrast of pumpernickel-pumped oysters and a lick of fennel to lend the pull and balance of anise to the dish. And, to finish, a pampering swirl of earthy pea puree.

The food at Blue is chef Steven Cameron's provocative, worldly vision. He comes to Blue, owned by Todd Rodgers and Bruno Pouget, after a twirl around the world that includes stops in home state Kansas at the acclaimed Forty Sardines, stages in Barcelona and in the Virgin Islands. Influences come from everywhere, but his menu is concise, cohesive and controlled. It's not all-over-the-block cooking, but thoughtful, restrained. He may milk the world for all the ingredients it's got, but there are no excesses, no frivolous expressions, no ingredients that merely show off fancy pedigrees. At Blue, a seasonal restaurant in Surf City, there's a command in the kitchen peerless in our coastal communities.

It's complemented by a floor show that runs seamlessly, despite summertime crowds, despite the beach attitude all around. Inside the funky-urban room set with plain-and-simple tables and chairs and a lineup of wooden booths, there's a sophisticated crowd, an appreciative audience for Cameron's handiwork. I lean in to whisper to my companions that many diners are dressed up: There are party frocks on women, light sport coats on men. Flip-flops need not apply. There's an appropriateness about the place and its patrons that delights me.

That extends to the service, which is knowledgeable, watchful and all-pro. Our server, by far the best I've experienced in years, is conversant in every aspect of the menu, able to describe the nuances of huitlacoche and crimson lentils, saba versus verjus and the power of guanciale over local scallops. She understands how to create a fine-dining experience in a casual setting, how to watch our table from a discreet distance and appear the second a question pops into our heads, how to orchestrate the flow of a multi-course dinner. She's smart, she's well-trained. She's still in college. It can be done.

BLUE

11th Street at Long Beach Boulevard, Surf City
(609) 494-7556

ATMOSPHERE: Soothing and rather sophisticated island dining space, with high-style artwork punctuating the rooms and keeping pace with the mood. It's very blue, very pretty, with appropriately understated tables and booths. **BYOB.** Dress ranges from party-ready to casual-chic.

SERVICE: Professional, informed, conscientious. Our primary server was the best I've experienced in many, many moons.

BEST DISHES: Fresh Portuguese sardines, warmed mussel salad, foie gras duo, huitlacoche crepe, grilled Barnegat Light scallops, pan-roasted sablefish, Amish chicken tandoori, red tea pot de creme, pa amb xocolat, carrot cake.

PRICE RANGE: Appetizers: \$10 to \$16. Entrees: \$20 to \$38. Sides: \$6 to \$10. Desserts: \$6 to \$8. Dinner for two, without tax and tip, averages about \$110. Note that the prices of specials, which are given when recited, can be slightly higher.

CREDIT CARDS: AE, MC, V.

HOURS: Dinner currently is being served from 5:30 to 10 p.m. seven days a week. After Labor Day, management plans to reduce the hours of operation to Thursday to Sunday. Call for updated information.

RESERVATIONS: Accepted.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS: All facilities on street level.

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At Blue, it's being done on every plate. No clunkers. There are those fresh sardines to start, which burst out from behind a thin veil of agre dolce to sop up the mustard vinaigrette then be tamed, ever so slightly, by a bouquet of parsley. It's herb as side dish, and it kicks. So, too, does a partnership in foie gras, served both as a terrine and in warmed, almost coddled form: Here, that seasaw of grape products — saba, verjus, raw and ripe — playfully mocks the intensity of the fattened liver, while stimulating ajo blanco urges it on. A crepe of huitlacoche (foodie for Mexican truffle, but very much its own smoldering, rustic fungus) is stuffed with creamy, equally alluring tripe, then energized by preserved limes and made lyrical by avocado cream. I'm making preserved limes, I am, I am.

Even a simple salad doesn't rest on the virtues of a good, starring ingredient. Mussels, plump and warm, are tossed with woody, earthy accents — radicchio grilled to smokiness, portobellos roasted to bacon-esque flavor, toast to give you room to experiment. It's a salad, a mere salad, yet Cameron's curiosity takes it to sensational.

Expert entrees

I shiver at the sight of sable on a menu and can't resist one of my all-time favorite fishes. Here, it's the best — wild Alaskan sable — and it's given that opposites-attract hit of anise from pumpernickel-topped oysters and fronds of fennel. I could take on a side of the pea puree all by its lonesome, but I wouldn't dare separate it from its sea-born pal. Nor would I dream of parting Barnegat Light scallops, so perfectly cooked with near-raw interiors and light grill marks forming a gentle crust, from verdant Jersey dandelions and guanciale. That last, cured pig cheek tasting something like a primo, ultra-fatty pancetta, smokes in this dish — literally and figuratively.

All this was wonderful, I mean beyond wonderful, but my devotion to this kitchen was clinched by an entree borrowed from India and so rarely done right in these parts: Chicken, born in Amish country and raised organically, is given tandoor treatment and emerges as a homage to, well, chicken juice. No kidding; it's a veritable chicken drink. Not a bite of this meaty half-of-a-bird was dry. Invigorated by a yogurt wash, given soul and depth from a stew of crimson lentils and brightness — brashness, almost — from a crowning salad of carrots scented forcefully and properly with mint, it's the best chicken dish I've had all year. And then some.

Cameron also does the desserts, and they follow the course of the savory menu, which is to say, they're worldly without being showy. There's a red tea-infused pot de creme, nudged into subtle sweetness by currants, tugged by a whiff of lemon, and smartly finished with lavender cream. There's a homage to Cameron's time in Barcelona with a pa amb xocolat, a bread-and-chocolate sandwich served with an olive oil marshmallow, a dash of fleur de sel and a touch of orange. It's very Spanish, it's very humble and it's terribly chic. I'd say it's the best dessert I've had all year, but I can't snub the confection that made me believe carrot cake could, once again, rock. Why? It's about pineapple and coconut and how these tropical sweets transform basic carrots. It's divine.

It is, after all, about understanding how to work the world's ingredients and it's being done by a chef who is trumping the competition at the Shore with rare talent and seemingly unimpeded vision. Steven Cameron is showing us all what can be done in a beach community, in a modest setting, in a seasonal — till mid-October — restaurant. Be smart, and get him while he's here, at Blue.

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Andrea Clurfeld is the restaurant critic for the Press. The Dining Companion appears weekly in Sunday's Entertainment section, while her casual dining column, Eat Out, appears on Fridays. Chat with Andrea on her blog, Eating with Andrea Clurfeld at www.app.com or by e-mailing her at clurfeld@app.com, calling her at (732) 643-4273 or writing her in care of the Asbury Park Press, 3601 Route 66, Neptune, N.J. 07754.

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