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NEW JERSEY

Tasteful Shadings in Colors and Flavors

By **KARLA COOK**
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WHEN the tumbling translucent surf is only a block and a dune away, a restaurant cannot compete; it must complement. Blue succeeds effortlessly at both design and dinner.

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First, the look: the low-slung corner restaurant faces a broad, busy street. The name is spelled out on windowsills, with the U askew.

Inside, the space seems to expand. Early in the evening, sun slants across the old wooden floorboards and turns each white-clothed table into a nearly glowing island made purer by the blues painted on the wall and ceiling. The colors and the name of the 10-year-old restaurant are allusions to the sea and sky; the owners, Todd Rodgers and Bruno Pouget, met while surfing.

The somewhat pricey one-page menu devised by the chef, Steven Cameron, is sophisticated yet elemental, strong on seafood, vegetables and global flavors. Ingredients are fresh, frequently local and beautifully combined. All are presented with flair and in sensible one-person portions. Servers work the right way, with low-key competence, attuned to water and silverware replacements without prompting.

All the appetizers tried on two visits were standouts. Among the favorites: a special of veal sweetbreads and artichoke ravioli, with fiddleheads dotting the bowl; sardines, butterflied and dredged in cornmeal, then fried and served with a sweet-sour mix of celery, pickled cauliflower, toasted pistachios, haricots verts and golden raisins, all pulled together with a mustard vinaigrette and dots of parsley oil; and the white asparagus salad with its deep-fried egg croquette, shavings of black summer truffle and ruffles of Mahón cheese.

Other fine starters include the perfectly poached Maine lobster with red grapefruit and green papaya; the unbound, baked crab cake on a summer succotash of cranberry beans, corn, red onion, cilantro, scallions, Anaheim peppers and radish; and the tender crepe surrounding a tangle of dark huitlacoche (corn fungus) and tripe with avocado dressing and snappy slivers of preserved lime.

Main courses were equally far-ranging, inspired and ambitious, though two entrees were

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oversalted on one evening: the chicken tandoori with red lentils, carrot and mint; and the special of crunchy-tender soft-shell crab, stuffed with too much herbed butter, over spoon bread. Roasted black bass was lusciously tender; its deeply colored skin made the purple potatoes in an accompanying salad all the more vivid, and the fresh tomato sauce took the dish even further on the palette.

Grilled scallops, sweet and yielding, were set against slightly bitter braised dandelion greens and bits of guanciale (cured pig's jowl) and pleasantly salty celery in a sparkling combination. Wild Alaskan sablefish, pan-roasted and matched with pea purée, a fat fried oyster and fennel fronds, is a dish that transcends its ingredients and could set a home cook on the path to cooking school.

A dish of short ribs with Lucques olives was good but heavy, despite its fresh Black Mission figs and its braising with lemons and dressing with zest. Roasted duck breast with olives, prunes and polenta was lighter. Chanterelle mushrooms were a memorable addition to a grilled strip steak au poivre. Chorizo and grilled leeks complemented a succulent slab of pan-roasted hake, but the accompanying wild squid were more raw than cooked and thus a slippery distraction.

There were two superior desserts: the warm chocolate cake with mango sorbet and sweetened condensed goat's milk (similar to dulce de leche), and carrot cake with a tatami-thin slice of grilled, sun-colored pineapple beneath and coconut sorbet on top.

Pineapple, coconut: sounds like the beach. Smells like the beach. But this carrot cake, with its edge of caramelization and essence of vegetable, paired with a cold orb of deliciously rich coconut, takes the beach to another level. So does Blue.

Blue

11th Street and

Long Beach Boulevard

Surf City

(609) 494-7556

www.bluelbi.com

VERY GOOD

THE SPACE Light and spacious, with old wooden floors and white-clothed tables; complete wheelchair access.

THE CROWD Quiet and convivial, a mix of dressy and casual; friendly and knowledgeable servers; a scattering of well-mannered children.

THE BAR Bring your own.

THE BILL Dinner entrees, \$21 to \$38. (Discover card not accepted.)

WHAT WE LIKE Fried sardines, white asparagus salad, heirloom tomato salad, lobster salad, crab cake with succotash, huitlacoche and tripe crepe, roasted black bass, grilled scallops with dandelions, roasted sablefish with oyster and fennel, lemon-braised short ribs, grilled strip steak, roasted duck breast with prunes and polenta, chocolate cake with mango sorbet, carrot cake with coconut sorbet.

IF YOU GO Open for dinner seasonally, daily through Labor Day, then Thursday to Sunday through Oct. 7, with seating from 5:30 to 10 p.m. Reservations recommended, particularly on weekends. Ample parking in the restaurant lot and on the street.



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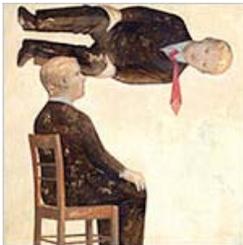


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