

## SETTING THE STANDARD

By [Laura Reiley](#), Times Food Critic

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### CLEARWATER

New restaurants are like puppies. They get cooed over even if they make a mess. The established restaurant (adult dog) has to do something out of the ordinary (chew the furniture, learn a new trick) to get that kind of attention.

I'm happy to report Café Ponte's upholstery is entirely intact. And though Chris Ponte has some new tricks — there's talk of an Italian casual concept in the works — that's not why I decided to revisit this fine dining institution launched in 2002. It's because people ask me about it all the time. Is it still good? Is it worth the money? Has anything slipped? I didn't know how to answer.

A recent lunch and dinner equipped me. The dining room looks positively spruce, its red, sage and black color scheme crisp and stylish; linens and table appointments are top-notch. Servers are courteous and professional even when slammed (lunch was swamped, dinner less so), their dark trousers and sage shirts rather posh. Bartenders give good patter, hostesses are fresh-faced and smiley, even phone reservations are taken with grace.

It's still a yardstick against which the area's other fine dining restaurants may be measured. Also, it's not outrageous-expensive: At dinner, no entree tips past \$34, most hover in the high \$20s; a three-course meal (your choice of appetizer, entree and dessert; foie gras is extra) is offered for \$33 between 5:30 and 6:30 p.m.

Take a peek into the gleaming open kitchen and you'll see new faces. Tony Bonanno started as chef de cuisine in November, maintaining a clean New American palate with a few Mediterranean and Asian doodads.

My favorites: A tower of seared foie gras medallions (\$17) is perched atop French-toast-like brioche with a few amarena cherries and a drizzle of intense eiswein syrup. At lunch, beets, goat cheese and toasted hazelnuts (\$8.90) come together in a salad with just a hint of orange. For lunch or dinner, the wild mushroom bisque (\$5, \$7) is earthy and rich, with a heady whiff of truffle oil. A dinner entree pairs sweet seared scallops (\$28) with a ragu of soft-braised shortribs, creamy corn polenta and a caramelized shallot sauce — like some crazy Jenga move, it's a towering flavor profile you can't believe works.

Then there's the chocolate. Best desserts: a flourless chocolate cake with a just-bitter ball of molasses-tinged caramel ice cream (\$8) and a chocolate soufflé (\$9) with vanilla bean ice cream. It's not a traditional eggy pouf, more like a dense, molten-centered lava cake, but that's a quibble.

As long as I'm quibbling, I'd say the fig and prosciutto tart (\$9) is really a pizza, but it didn't stop me from slicing that baby into wedges and wrangling the frisée and caramelized onions into submission. Lots of nice ingredients, but I prefer Ponte's pizzas, especially the Yukon gold potato, bacon, cheddar, sour cream and scallion (\$12).

The kitchen is especially adept at battering and crisply frying (note the perfect fried rice cake cube on the Szechuan orange beef at lunch, \$11.90, and the stunning whole tempura-fried snapper at dinner, \$28), which is why I was surprised that the rock shrimp and crab cake (\$12) was one of the only dishes that left me cold. The other ingredients — a celery root and apple slaw, a dab of lemon jam — overshadowed the demure cakes. But let's get back to that snapper: What a party. Looking like it was battered and fried mid-swim, its sweet flavor and perfect texture were complemented by a gingery soy puddle and baby bok choy, scallion and other veggies strewn across the pretty plate. Sadly, this dish was my tablemate's and not my own; my fork had a way of wandering away from my own steak au poivre (\$28) — a little chewy but with a fiery crust and fine sautéed wild mushrooms — and back over to visit the fish.

Unsurprisingly, Ponte's wine list is smart (but short), bathrooms are immaculate and coffee and tea service exceptional. Even iced tea gets a small glass carafe of simple syrup to save you from battling those pesky sugar granules. A tiny thing, sure, but

another detail that shows Café Ponte's pedigree.

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## .review

### Café Ponte

13505 Icot Blvd. No 214, Clearwater

(727) 538-5768; [cafeponte.com](http://cafeponte.com)

**Cuisine:** New American

Hours: 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. and 5:30 to 9 p.m. Monday through Thursday; 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. and 5:30 to 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday

**Details:** V, MC, Amex; reservations recommended; full bar

**Prices:** Dinner appetizers \$9 to \$17; dinner entrees \$18 to \$34; three-course menu for \$33 available 5:30 to 6:30 p.m.

Rating out of four stars:

**Food:**  **Service:** 

**Atmosphere:** 

**Overall:** 

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