

Foraging for winners

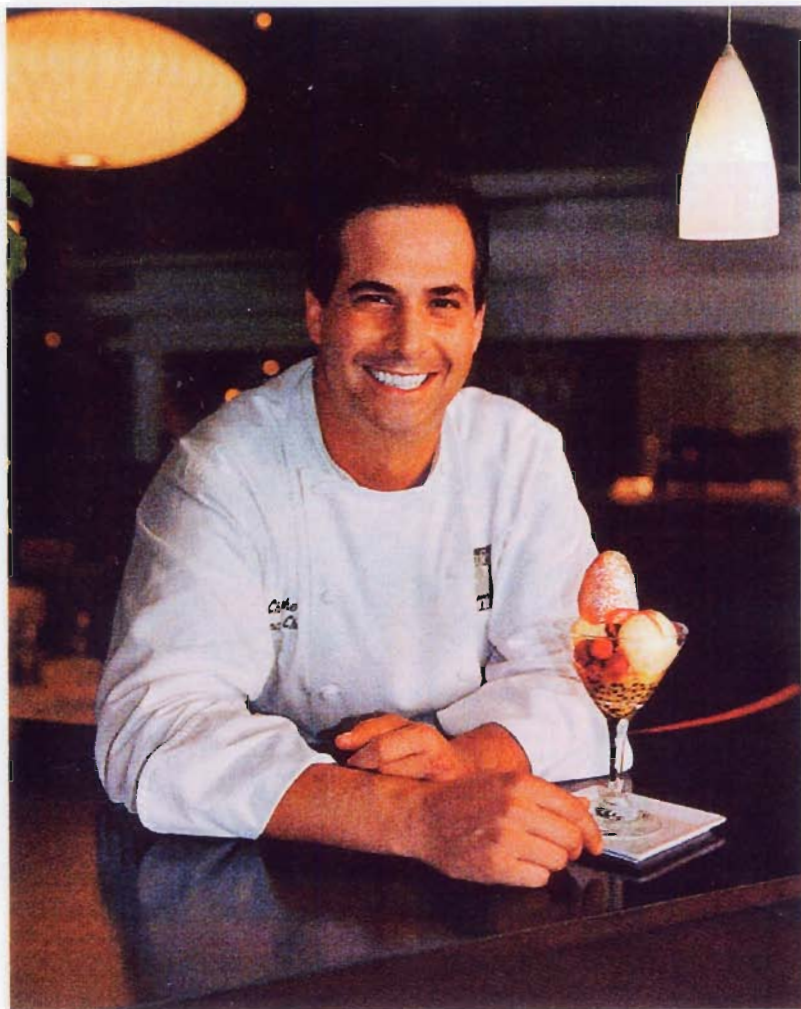
It was a bland year for Tampa Bay restaurants, but a plateful of standouts give people who love good food reason to get out.

By CHRIS SHERMAN, Times Food Critic
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[Times photos: Douglas R. Clifford]

Cafe Ponte's namesake, Chris Ponte, bakes a fig and prosciutto tart at his Largo restaurant, where the food is pricey and well worth it.



PHOTOGRAPHS: ALLEN ROCKICH

Around the World To Clearwater

A chef's travels bring international tastes to the coast.

Want to know what has touched chef Chris Ponte's soul during his bright, highlight-filled career? Just look at his menu.

"Everything is my own," he says, pulling up a chair while his well-trained staff continues to prepare dishes at Cafe Ponte, Chris's award-winning restaurant in Clearwater. "But it's also based on what I've learned and seen."

The Maine Lobster Risotto recalls the chef's early years in New England. "I grew up in Massachusetts, in the next town over from Emeril Lagasse. We went to the same culi-

nary school—Johnson & Wales University in Rhode Island—and he's Portuguese, like me," says Chris.

Next stop: Clearwater, where he served as sous-chef at a restaurant

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Chris Ponte

owned by Nancy Lowrey, now his manager at Cafe Ponte. "You never know what guest in a restaurant will change your life," says Chris of a generous patron who virtually supplied the young chef a complete culi-

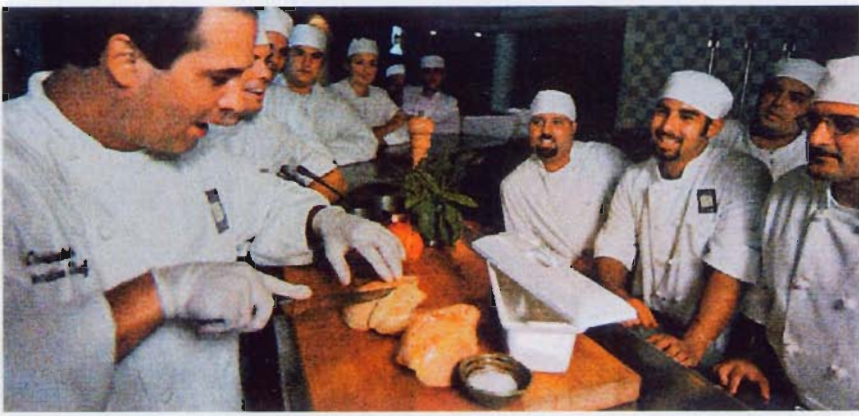
top: It's hard to make room for dessert, given the splendid entrées at Cafe Ponte, but the payoff is great. above: Chris encourages Malteo Petoia (right) as he prepares a potato peel pizza.

nary education in Paris (see box on page 47 Florida Living). Today, Chris's menu boasts Dozen Vegetable Pistou and skate with sautéed greens and a pineapple-caper brown butter sauce, both influenced by his years in France.

French Connections

Chris quickly points to the sesame-crusting tuna as a tribute to South

Florida cuisine. When the lure of the yachts in the waters beyond beckoned, Chris heeded the call. "I traveled for three years on a 140-foot yacht, cooking for the charters," Chris explains of the rich chapter of



top, left: Chris Ponte assembles a foie gras terrine for his staff of sous-chefs. The cafe approaches cuisine with the discipline of Chris's French training. **above:** Nancy Lowrey, his friend and current cafe manager, and Chris study wines for their impressive array. **left:** Cafe Ponte seats 250 for lunch and dinner. The restaurant recently expanded to include an area for music.

his life. "We went throughout the Caribbean, all over the Mediterranean, into Turkey, Monte Carlo, Portofino, Corsica, Spain, Venice, and Croatia. It was such an experience for me."

As you can imagine, flavors from his travels show up in Clearwater today. Chris links to the Caribbean his spiced Duck Breast with the tamarind-banana chutney and the Crispy Snapper with the ginger-vanilla-rum butter. One of his always-on-the-menu items, Potato-Crusted Sea Bass, stems from his stint in New York, where he worked with chefs Daniel Boulud and François Payard.

Florida Wins Chris

On it goes. From one experience layered with flavor to yet another. "I always wanted my own place," says Chris, who was admittedly hooked on Florida after all his travels. "In order to do that, I needed to train with the best in France, New York, and Miami. Then I found this location—it was a buffet restaurant, but one of

Tampa's best architects, Richard Zingale, did this for me." He gazes with pleasure at the snappy, contemporary interior, which befits the trendy mood of the restaurant.

"When I opened my doors, I didn't know what my specialty would be," Chris says. "The sea bass, the osso buco, and the tuna trio are all very popular with guests. I was once told that young, generous chefs do very well."

At 36, armed with a world of experience, Chris finds himself young, most generous, and certainly doing very well. The restaurant, which seats 250 people, recently expanded to accommodate live jazz on weekends.

The Cafe Ponte menu changes four times a year. "I'm never satisfied," says Chris with an eye to future flavors. "I'm always chasing that next dish."

CAROLANNE GRIFFITH ROBERTS

Cafe Ponte is located off Ulmerton Road in the Icot Center at 13505 Icot Blvd. in Clearwater; (727) 538-5768 or www.cafeponte.com.

A Patron's Gift

Chris remembers one customer in particular—for good reason. "He'd come in every Sunday and ask me to make his food plain," says the chef, then unaware of this diner's chemotherapy treatments. As a friendship grew between the chef and the man, retired entrepreneur John Manning, Chris shared his dream of training at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris.

"Mr. Manning paid more than \$80,000 for my education there," marvels Chris. "I finished first in all my classes. He would come over to Paris to visit, and he saw me graduate." John Manning died before the creation of Cafe Ponte, "but he knew I appreciated his help," says Chris.