



Passionate Ponte

Don't be fooled by its strip-mall setting — Cafe Ponte is a dining delight.

By Julie W. Martin

As the private chef aboard financier Leon Black's 130-foot yacht, Chris Ponte traveled the world, setting his sights on each port as a beacon of gastronomic discovery.

On each foray into town to buy food for the crew, the charismatic New Englander would beg suppliers for local recipes. And while Largo is a far cry from Portofino, Chef Ponte has brought home a travelogue of epicurean delights as authentic as they are creative. Beef carpaccio, braised osso bucco, crispy duck confit, Portuguese-style clams, Asian duck pizza and chorizo-crust cod meld into a dinner menu listing more than 42 items.

Born in Massachusetts, Ponte was schooled at the Cordon Bleu, France's iconic culinary institute, and apprenticed at the famed Taillevent in Paris. When he began looking for a geographic locale to open his first restaurant, his family ties and fondness for Florida's west coast led him back here.

Lucky for Tampa Bay.

Cafe Ponte (rhymes with "font") strikes a powerful pose in an otherwise non-descript shopping area and office park in mid-Pinellas County, the Rubin-ICOT center on Ulmerton Road in Largo. Ponte hoped to attract local business types, but his sublime Mediterranean cuisine — with Asian angles and a French twist — has captured the attention of gourmets and mesmerized food critics from all over since opening in August 2002.

Upon entering the 163-seat restaurant, we immediately felt an aura of style and showmanship that Ponte likens to "going to the theater." Choosing seats in the clubby bar area, we were in perfect position to view the center stage, where apron-clad waiters whisk away entrees from the open kitchen and elegantly deliver them to patrons in the two-tiered dining area.

The two types of bread served here are worth a



PHOTOGRAPH BY JOE TRUANA

The menu Chris Ponte created reads more like a scrapbook from his world travels.

CAFE PONTE

CUISINE ■ Contemporary American
ADDRESS ■ 13505 Icot Blvd., Suite 214, Largo
TELEPHONE ■ 727-538-5768
WEB ■ cafeponte.com
HOURS ■ Mon.-Fri., 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m.;
Tues.-Thur., 5:30-10 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 5:30-11 p.m.

special mention: the pillow-soft foccacia (an original Ponte adaptation of his overseas connection) and the chewy slices of Italian ciabetta. Both were accompanied with sweet butter and a delicious olive tapenade.

We began with the Creamy Mushroom Soup, topped with a dollop of light truffle cream and black truffle dust (\$3.50). Served in a plain white cup and saucer, its velvety texture and mocha coloring could have passed for a smooth latte (and could have been drunk just as easily). We couldn't wait to try the Roasted Beet Salad (\$7): garnet-red beet medallions arranged in an insignia; flanked with tangerine slices and hazelnut bits over micro-greens and a palm-sized piece of fried goat cheese; and complemented with a tangerine vinaigrette. Next up was the Fig and Prosciutto Tart (\$6.50). The size of a personal pizza, this classic Italian combination featured Gorgonzola cheese, caramelized onions and figs amid a centerpiece of prosciutto for an incredible ying-yang taste (like peanut butter and jelly).

Each plate was a picture postcard, and the Crispy Whole Snapper (\$26) was no exception. It appeared as if the foot-long tempura-style fish had been caught in

mid-air and laid gently on a bed of fresh red and yellow peppers, sugar snap peas and bok choy — still swimming in a pool of ginger vanilla rum butter sauce. Served whole, the luscious saltwater fish had plenty of nooks and crannies. As our waitress told us, "I've seen tiny women leave nothing but the bones." That's all we left, too.

Our dessert, the Lychee Fruit Panna Cotta (\$7), was a still life of color and composition. In this version of the Italian custard, the sweet Asian fruit was layered with mango gelée, cilantro granita and mango sorbet; topped with a sugared "leaf" of cilantro; and served with a dense pineapple macadamia nut cake with a hint of almond. All that had us wishing for more. Other tempting treats included the Walnut Caramel Tart (\$7), Baked Spice Banana with Coconut Sorbet (\$6.50) and the Kaffir Lime Crème Brulee (\$5.50).

If you agree with Ponte that "food is an art form," then Cafe Ponte is truly a performance in fine dining. □

Julie W. Martin is a local freelance writer. Send comments to editorial@tampabayillustrated.com.