



DINING

A Creative Twist On Mediterranean

By MARYD. SCOURTES
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CLEARWATER — Pick up a menu in just about any restaurant and you'll find pasta, fish and steak.

But it's how Christopher Ponte cooks such dishes as Chicken Fettuccine Pasta, Sesame Crusted Tuna and Black Angus New York Sirloin that has diners returning to Cafe Ponte (the e is silent).

The chef serves contemporary Mediterranean cuisine with light Asian and French touches, staying true to flavors without going overboard with fussy combinations.

Red, sage and chocolate-brown banquettes and tables make for a comfortable dining space at the Icot Center restaurant, a location formerly occupied by Bella's, Johnny's and Phatz.

Ponte, who opened the 168-seat restaurant in late August, scores high marks with his Fig and Prosciutto Tart, a crisp pizza crust adorned with caramelized onions and Gonzola cheese and glazed with port and balsamic vine-

DINING REVIEW

Cafe Ponte

BOTTOM LINE: Creative Mediterranean cuisine with Asian and French accents

CRITIC'S RATING: Food: A-; Service: B

WHERE: 13505 Icot Blvd., Clearwater (in Icot Center)

HOURS: Monday, 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; Tuesday through Thursday, 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. and 5:30 to 10 p.m.; Friday, 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. and 5:30 to 11 p.m.; Saturday, 5:30 to 11 p.m.; closed Sunday

CREDIT CARDS: AE, MC, V

RESERVATIONS: Yes

SMOKING: Separate smoking area

CHILDREN'S MENU: Can accommodate

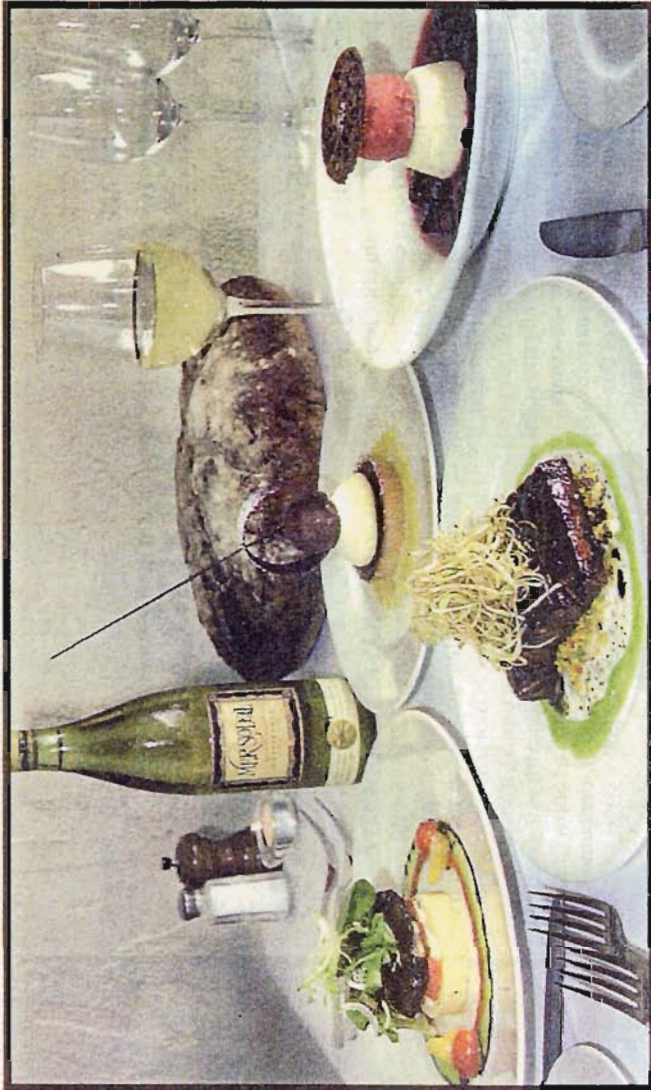
WHEELCHAIR ACCESS: Yes

ALCOHOL: Full bar and wine list

PRICERANGE: Entrees range from \$8 to \$25; a \$15 three-course menu is offered Tuesday through Saturday from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m.

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gar. Garnished with a snazzy swirl of prosciutto, the dish is a perfect balance of sweet, sour and salty tastes.



Tribune photo by BRUCE HOSKING

Cafe Ponte's menu includes, clockwise from front, Lacquered Salmon, Fire Roasted Portobello Mushroom, Banana Tart and Lemon Grass Panna Cotta.

Oysters Ponte, an updated version of oysters Rockefeller, gets a flavor boost from a creamy Parmesan sauce bolstered by peppery arugula and seasoned pancetta.

Roasted Butternut Squash Soup, Trio of Tuna, Potato Herb Goat Cheese Terrine and Beef Carpaccio round out the appetizer choices.

As for entrees, Ponte has a way with baked sweet sea bass, which sparkles under a crisp blanket of shredded potatoes and is served with a red wine sauce.

The complementary pairing of Lacquered Salmon with a basil and curry couscous is also a success. Moroccan zahtar adds tartness to the fish, punched up with a mahogany glaze of vinegar, grainy mustard and honey. The dish is

adorned with crisp leek straws that rival McDonald's fries.

Wild Mushroom Soy broth jazzes up the Asian-style Sesame Crusted Tuna, served with coconut rice cakes and stir-fried vegetables.

Mediterranean ravioli filled with goat cheese and butternut squash are topped with a brown butter sauce, sage and a drizzle of mascarpone cheese.

You can make your cardiologist happy by ordering the pan-roasted snapper. It's bathed in a light tomato broth kissed with ginger and crunchiness with bok choy, sprouts and baby greens.

Other entrees include duck breast, braised osso buco and roasted chicken breast with white truffle oil.

Desserts are over the top. Chocolate Flourless Cake is so

moist it seems like a cross between pudding and cake. Consider yourself lucky if you have room for the Petit Four Plate, a sampler of more than a half dozen of the day's desserts. It's very European and imaginative. Italian gelato graces many desserts as well.

The staff is pleasant and efficient, but sometimes a bit rushed. On one of our visits the server reversed two similar orders. The general manager came over and apologized because a replacement meal was slow. Later, a beautiful complimentary dessert was presented with more apologies.

If only more restaurants would follow their gracious lead.

Tribune reviewers eat anonymously. Mary D. Scourtes can be reached at (813) 259-7635.