

The New Destination for Clearwater

Café Ponte, Clearwater

By Alicia Callanan Mandigo

He was warned the location was a “failure location” as supportive patrons wished him luck. It was unnerving, to say the least. But years of travel finally brought Chris Ponte to his destination, his own restaurant. “It’s what I had always worked towards. I had worked as a chef on a private yacht, making really good money and seeing the world, but all that time I was saving up so I could have my own place,” says Chef/Owner Chris Ponte. Café Ponte, now in its third year, is regarded as one of the area’s best restaurants, making it clear that Ponte’s plan of restaurant ownership was on the right path from the beginning.

Located in the Rubin-ICOT center, the dining room at Café Ponte is a sophisticated blend of contemporary design, soothing earth tones, and global nuances. In a way it reflects Ponte’s culinary style, which, while based classic French disciplines, is expressive of his many travels. A sampling of appetizers is enough illustrate that. Calamari, a perennial favorite, enjoys a whole new flavor profile when flash fried with a caramel soy glaze, toasted peanuts and a cilantro aioli. The signature Oysters Ponte are brick oven baked with apple smoked bacon, arugula and a touch of Pernod sauce. And seared Hudson Valley Foie Gras takes this French classic to the South Pacific with the addition of caramelized pineapple, a star anise-passion fruit sauce and a vanilla bean brioche. The entire concoction melts in your mouth so seamlessly, it’s guaranteed to make a foie gras fan out of anybody.

While Ponte came to the table with a clear vision and considerable talent, there’s no question he’s enjoyed his share of good fortune. After graduating from Johnson & Wales University in Providence, Rhode Island, Ponte fell into favor with a restaurant patron who made a habit of special requests. The patron eventually sent Ponte to study at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris. The extraordinary opportunity afforded him made such an impact, Ponte now tries to provide similar opportunities to his chefs through an exchange program with a Michelin rated resort in Italy.

Coupling his good fortune with determination, Ponte took several unpaid apprenticeships while working in New York, the most notable of which was with famed chef Daniel Boulud. And all of that culminated in the creation of Café Ponte in 2002. It’s been capturing stellar reviews and impressive awards ever since.

Café Ponte offers a complete menu that moves from appetizers on to a variety of raw selections that include Kobe Beef Carpaccio, Caviar and Filet Mignon Tartar. Soups include Maine Lobster Chowder and the restaurant’s signature Mushroom Soup. “We make everything in house,” explains Ponte, “we make all the sauces, the soups, even the bread. If you come here in the morning you’ll see them in the back rolling out the dough.

We make everything in house because it gives me control of everything that's leaving the kitchen," he says. That control lends incredible finesse to his mushroom soup. It is deep and silky and comes topped with indulgent slivers of black truffles that add another dimension to the natural earthiness of mushroom soup.

Among the salads, the Beet Salad is a clear standout. Roasted beets and goat cheese always work well together, but Ponte takes things a step further by flash frying the goat cheese into a fritter and then placing it under a dome of roasted beets. The treatment not only gives the dish a little crunch, the warmth of the goat cheese heightens the flavors so much that again everything just melds together seamlessly.

In fact, from the appetizers through the Thin Crust Pizzas to the entrees, Ponte and his crew do a masterful job of creating dishes that take a variety of flavors and join them together seamlessly on the palette. "I really have to credit my crew with everything," says Ponte, "it is my vision, but they're the ones that have to executive it every day." They're getting it right every day because Ponte is always in the thick of it. He not only works the line, he can be found behind the bar, working salads, or checking on front of house.

Café Ponte's signature entrée is a classic Osso Bucco, a dish Ponte labors over as "a gift to my guests, I just feel it's a dish they should be able to experience." But the restaurant is, after all, in Clearwater, which suggests seafood. There's plenty of it, and it all benefits from Ponte's eclectic view of food. Tender and flavorful Artic Char is prepared Provencal style with a colorful zucchini ribbon confit, green lentils and an innovative eggplant caviar. Delicately pan seared Diver Scallops have an incredible impact when paired with Ponte's apple-celeriac puree. Served with perfectly al dente fingerling potato raviolis, the dish comes together in such a warm, creamy medley that it almost qualifies as comfort food.

While the dessert menu might feature familiar names, expect to see some exciting interpretations of your old favorites. The Banana Split, for instance, splits apart the ingredients rather than the banana. Slightly caramelized banana medallions ride a ribbon of chocolate down the center of the plate. On one side is a mouth-watering chocolate wafer-chocolate mousse sandwich. On the other side is a healthy dollop of rich vanilla ice cream. It's undoubtedly the lightest and most creative banana split you'll ever have.

As Café Ponte heads into its fourth year, Ponte is looking to open a second location. It won't be a second Café Ponte, it will be a new concept altogether. And if the success of his original restaurant is any indication of how things will go... it is sure to be the new choice for destination dining in Clearwater.

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