

First bite: Standards of sophistication



[Times photos: Carrie Pratt]
Pan Roasted Yellow Tail Snapper sits in front of the wine vault at Cafe Ponte in Largo.

By CHRIS SHERMAN, Times Staff Writer

© St. Petersburg Times

published October 3, 2002

Cafe Ponte showcases the skills of chef Chris Ponte, who uses classical French technique to elevate menu staples.

LARGO -- Chef Chris Ponte has brought to the Rubin-ICOT center what, from my first bites, could be that area's best offering since the Grill at Feather Sound's brief glory days. Ponte, who started at Largo's Pepper Mill 10 years ago, has spent the past decade studying at the Cordon Bleu and Taillevent in Paris and with chefs Daniel Boulud and Francois Payard in New York. It shows at his Cafe Ponte in subtle good taste from the food to the decor.

The food is straightforward, modern Asian and Italian favorites and a hint of older staples, all elevated by rare classical French technique and drop-dead presentation.

That means the smoothest mushroom soup I've tasted in Florida -- slippery shiitakes, truffle dust and cream, as heavenly as it is earthy -- and a lusciously rustic tart of fresh figs topped with a swirl of prosciutto.

Ponte was lured back to build a rooftop restaurant in a Tampa office tower, but that project failed, and he and wife Jenny switched to the Rubin-ICOT Center in mid Pinellas.

Cafe Ponte takes space that has been a branch of Bella's, Johnny's Italian and other startups, but you won't recognize it. They've opened up the windows, made an expansive open kitchen, installed a glass wine cellar and dressed it with a subtle combination of black, red, brown and lots of crisp white linens.

The menu seems tailored for the neighborhood's power lunchers and for evening diners looking for solid flavors with fresh polish and flavor.

Even a grilled steak sandwich gets chef-made mayonnaise, Gruyere and the only fries I've had in the bistro revival that are crisp enough that the French would call them pommes frites.

In the modern standard of sesame tuna, the Asian flavor came through in baby bok choy and other vegetables braised in a mushroom-soy sauce.

Desserts show grand French style. Maybe there's even too much when a wheel of panna cotta, the cream pudding of Italian farmhouses, dresses up in fresh raspberry sauce and wears crisp sesame wafers at rakish angles. On second thought, it's not too much at all. Some service is still a little raw, but the only culinary slip was a classic entree salad: greens, apples, goat cheese in a port vinaigrette, but the duck leg was too dry and the lentils needed vinegar.

At dinner, which Ponte has just added, the menu promises to follow the same path of enhancing the familiar: roasted chicken with wild mushrooms, arugula and lemon polenta; salmon lacquered with balsamic; osso bucco with risotto and porcini broth; lamb crusted with walnuts and paired with butternut squash and a zinfandel sauce.



A trio of sashimi, tartar and sesame seed crusted tuna with wontons and lemon coulis at Cafe Ponte.

That's more than enough to get me back.