

STAR GAZING

By Geodie Baxter Padgett

CULINARY STAR | CHRISTOPHER PONTE

Christopher Ponte, owner of Café Ponte in Largo, jumped started his career through the kindness of a stranger. Years ago, while Ponte worked at the Peppermill restaurant in Clearwater, he prepared special meals for a customer with cancer. One day, the customer asked Ponte what his dream was.

"To study cooking in Europe," replied Ponte.

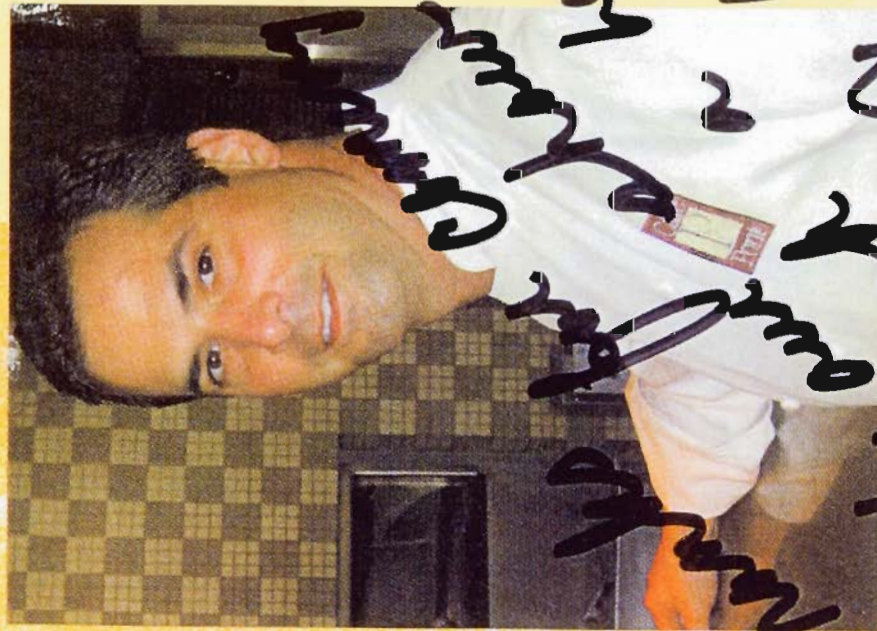
Two weeks later, the customer offered to sponsor Ponte's dream, and he was off to study culinary arts at Cordon Bleu in Paris for three and a half years. That experience, along with years of working in great restaurants and traveling the world as a private chef, contributed to the international flair in Ponte's creations.

Ponte prefers to keep his flavors simple and focus on pairing high quality ingredients with nice presentation. When asked how he designs a plate for a new dish, he answers like a painter.

"I have a white plate, and I start throwing paint on it. It has to have balance to the eye, great color, and most importantly, textures and tastes."

Café Ponte's success is evident in the number of impressive awards it has earned in the year and half since opening. In 2003 it was named Best New Restaurant by restaurant critic Chris Sherman of the *St. Petersburg Times* and by *Florida Trend Magazine*. This year, the restaurant received the Golden Spoon Award from *Florida Trend Magazine* and, having past its first birthday, was simply named Best Restaurant by Chris Sherman.

Café Ponte is located at 13505 Icot Boulevard in Clearwater. It's open Monday through Friday for lunch (11:30 a.m. – 2:30 p.m.), Tuesday through Thursday for dinner (5:30 p.m. – 11:00 p.m.) and Friday and Saturday for dinner (5:30 p.m. – 11:00 p.m.).



Christopher Ponte