

CAFE PANACHE

Story by Mary Ellen Marks



From the moment I stepped out of the cold pre-winter rain into the dimly lit foyer of Café Panache in Ramsey I was hooked. The restaurant seemed to be a unique synthesis of up-scale chic and cozy bistro. A leather settee rested beneath high mahogany-trimmed windows draped in cream sheers with silk banding. A floor arrangement boasted garnet-colored mums, dried grasses with plumes, oversized cabbage and a huge pumpkin fresh from Abma's Farm in Wyckoff, New Jersey. This is the same farm that Café Panache's owner-chef Kevin Kohler visits almost every morning to hand-pick the fruits and vegetables for his restaurant. Talk about the ultimate in fresh dining.

My associate and I were escorted to a table at the far end of the room by Mark the maître d. He opened our wine. (This place is a BYOB.) Kevin slowly made his way to our table, stopping to shake hands and hug customers seated around us. I asked him how he has kept his business successful for twenty-five years. "I try to reinvent myself," he replied. He uses a menu that changes every few days consisting of about twenty items, not including desserts. His quest is to please the palate by featuring an assortment of farm-fresh items. And Kevin talks about his produce with affection. "We're serving the last of the peaches. They'll be gone soon," he lamented.

Above: Soft Shell Crab Tempura with pickled-that-morning vegetables, rainbow swiss chard and risotto with lobster miso sauce. Below (l-r) Tuna Tartare Tian with Sesame Seaweed Salad. East Coast Naked Cowboy Oysters on the Half Shell served with a Minionette Sauce; Charlotte, a warm bread pudding with Jersey peaches and homemade mascarpone ice cream.





Owner-Chef Kevin Kohler with wife Christy.

Glancing at the menu in front of me I could see the infusion of Kevin's ideas – Crostini of Mousse Foie Gras with Caramelized Fresh Apples, Homemade Jersey Corn Agnoletti, Terrine of Roasted Red Peppers with Goat Cheese and White Eggplant, Crispy Confit Duckling Rare Roasted Breast in a Jersey Peach Puree and Veal Osso Bucco with Soft Polenta and Rosemary Jus. As I looked further I noticed the diversity of selections ran the gamut – Imported Serrano Ham from Spain, Garganelli Pasta with Lobster Bouillabaisse, Atlantic Salmon in an Herbal Sauce Vierge, Almond Chicken with Garam Masala Whole Grain Mustard, and Braised Short Ribs with Dark Beer, Black Molasses and Indian Spices. I wasn't surprised to hear that Kevin's resume included such New York City restaurants as at La Petite Marmite, The Palace and The Four Seasons.

In Kevin's earlier years, while working at Le Relais, on Madison Avenue, there was a salad called Panache on the menu. It was a mixture of three ingredients – a lettuce, a fruit and a vegetable (usually beets). "A mélange to represent the different meanings of the word panache," Kevin said. When he decided to open this restaurant in Ramsey, his first partner encouraged him to name the restaurant Café Panache after this dish. Kevin never put that salad on his menu, but its eclectic influence has left its mark.

Café Panache was recently redesigned by Kevin's wife Christy, who placed importance on a strong attention to detail. "I was going for understated elegance, to fit what my husband does." The walls were lined in banquettes with leather seats and brocade backrests in gray-blue and nutmeg floral. Chairs were stained dark with coordinating textured fabric seats. Jazz music played in the back ground. There was even an acoustical ceiling to absorb noise. Christy seemed to think of everything.

Our waiter, Xavier – attentive, knowledgeable and friendly – took



Photograph by Tom Ando

our order. We started with plump and opaque (with just a hint of brine) East Coast Naked Cowboy Oysters on the Half Shell served with a classically made Minionette Sauce. Next, we tried a Tuna Tartare Tian with Sesame Seaweed Salad in Ginger Ponzu Sauce and a tower of Soft Shell Crab Tempura, Picked-That-Morning Vegetables, Sautéed Rainbow Swiss Chard and Risotto with Lobster Miso Sauce and Chive Oil. The seafood was fresh and the vegetables, with every bite, seemed to burst with their unique flavors. It was that good. We ordered Charlotte, a warm bread pudding, for dessert made with Jersey peaches (Kevin's favorite fruit) and topped with homemade mascarpone ice cream. It was nothing short of decadent.

At this point, the restaurant was bustling like a Saturday night, even though it was only Monday. As my associate and I thanked Kevin for a superb meal he asked us, "Did you know panache also means feather?" Indeed, that makes perfect sense. Café Panache's friendly atmosphere and exquisite cuisine comprise the shaft of the plume. The beauty emanates from within.

I met a man in the foyer on my way out and asked him what he liked most about Café Panache. "I've been coming here for 25 years. I don't have a favorite dish. I just let Kevin feed me. It's always great."

BYOB cafepanache.com 🍷