

RESTAURANTS

RESTAURANTS; Comfort and Joy

By David Corcoran

April 13, 2003

IT would be easy to walk right past Marco & Pepe without noticing, and perhaps that is part of the idea. Certainly it is part of the charm.

The restaurant, with only a sign painted inconspicuously in a front window, inhabits a neighborhood in transition, though it is not easy to say from what to what. The squat two-story building, on a corner opposite Jersey City's extravagantly ornamented, timeworn City Hall, was a bodega; it is made of the fading dun-colored brick that evokes Depression-era Hudson County as vividly as any tale of Boss Frank Hague.

But an up-to-date culinary intelligence is evident in virtually everything else about the place, starting with the beverage list, a tall, plain-paper document handed to you by a member of the winsome, well-informed young staff. Its entire first page is devoted to beer: four dozen bottles, ranked from light and mild to dark and strong, from the Spanish Estrella Galicia to the Scottish champ with the fetching name Old Engine Oil, each one served in its own branded glass.

Over the long wooden bar, where single diners and couples sit lost in thought or conversation or reading matter, hanging lamps that seem to have been salvaged from a 1930's schoolhouse cast pools of yellow light. The banquettes are old church pews. On a panel of distressed wallboard beside a table in the back, a local artist has penciled a prose poem composed of the dictionary definitions of words that took his fancy: palimpsest, prelapsarian, eldritch. If it all sounds a little ramshackle, fair enough. But let's call it comfortable. It's part two-star restaurant, part neighborhood hangout.

Marco & Pepe was born two years ago, when two transplanted Manhattanites, Ralph and Beverly Rodriguez, opened it as a cafe. (Marco and Pepe are their dogs.) Last summer, responding to a felt need in the neighborhood's growing population of hip urban gentry -- what you might call Generation Y.1 -- they added a full kitchen and a talented chef, Ian Topper-Kapitan.

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Mr. Topper-Kapitan, 32 (his wife, Kim, runs the front of the house), has worked in such imposing kitchens as JoJo, Vong and the Ryland Inn. His menu changes often; my two visits, less than a month apart, had only half the dishes in common. But his idiom remains the same: an eclectic but focused style that draws from American, French, Italian and Spanish techniques and ingredients to produce dishes that ring with fresh, energetic flavors.

Warmed Bucheron, a French goat cheese, underlies a shaped salad that sits on the plate like a crown. The cheese is tart and creamy; the other ingredients -- arugula, escarole, pear compote and balsamic vinegar reduction -- contribute notes of sweetness, sharpness and fruit. That first-rate arugula also stars in its own salad, with asparagus, golden beets, frisée and aged-sherry vinaigrette, and it plays a supporting role under a mellow, warm onion tart. Watercress, another sharp-tasting early-spring green, is mated with walnuts and Cabrales, the salty, muscular blue cheese from Spain.

Two soups were pleasant enough, but each held something back. Potato with roasted garlic would have been better with a sturdier broth, and a seafood chowder with shrimp, lobster and black bass tasted mainly of salt and smoky ham. Mushroom-and-goat cheese crostini were fun food, a big platter of grilled toasts that reminded us of pizza.

Fittingly for a place that sets so much store by its wines and beers, Marco & Pepe offers a bar menu, with soups, sandwiches and cheeses. The only item we tried was the hamburger, and it went over well, with high-quality chopped steak on a brioche bun and excellent crisp fries.

The restaurant is welcoming to families. But that burger might be a more prudent choice for children than the entree seemingly aimed at them: macaroni and cheese. This is PG-13 pasta, with liberal doses of aged Gruyère cheese, juicy lardons, bluefoot mushrooms and black truffle oil. It's a splendid dish.

Nor is it the only one. Glisteningly fresh diver scallops are pan-seared, then boldly matched with brussels sprouts, wild mushrooms, mashed potatoes with truffle butter, and bacon -- a brilliant combination of ingredients. (On another visit, a thick fillet of halibut got similar treatment, minus the sprouts.) Grilled shrimps work beautifully in a risotto with artichoke hearts, mushrooms, sweet roasted tomatoes and a basil-lobster broth. I liked another seasonal risotto, of winter squash, though the squash seemed to contribute mainly color to a dish whose principal players were wild mushrooms, mascarpone cheese and truffle oil.

Duck confit is rich and tender and ideally complemented by a bright sauté of baby spinach, roasted corn and braised carrots in a sweet-and-sour cider reduction. On another evening, duck breast was gamy and chewy, with clear duck character.

Desserts are less memorable than most of the main courses, though I enjoyed an eggy, tangy lemon tart and various gelatos and sorbets from the supplier Ciao Bella. But Mr. Topper-Kapitan lays on a fine, well-balanced cheese plate: aged Gouda, Bucheron and Cabrales on the night I tried it. And he draws your eye inexorably to the other side of the dessert menu: a list of ports, single-malt Scotches and other after-dinner drinks so lovingly described that you want to move to the neighborhood, spend a couple of weeks of evenings here and sample every single one.

Marco & Pepe

289 Grove Street, Jersey City

(201)860-9688

www.marcoandpepe.com

VERY GOOD

ATMOSPHERE -- Narrow urban space with a film-noir feel and a comfortable bar scene.

SERVICE -- Hip, minus the attitude: young, pleasant and well-informed.

SMOKING -- Not allowed.

WINE LIST -- Short but with flair; good choices by the glass, and many bottles in the \$20's.

RECOMMENDED DISHES -- Watercress salad, warm Bucheron salad, arugula salad, onion tart; chopped-steak burger, risotto, pan-seared diver scallops, pan-roasted halibut, duck confit, macaroni and cheese; lemon tart, gelatos, sorbets.

PRICE RANGE -- Brunch and lunch: appetizers, \$5 to 11; entrees, \$7 to \$12. Dinner: appetizers, \$5 to \$11; entrees, \$15 to \$25; desserts, \$4 to \$6, with a \$9 cheese plate. Bar menu: \$2.50 to \$9.

HOURS -- Closed Mondays. Brunch and lunch: Saturdays and Sundays, 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Dinner: Tuesdays and Wednesdays, 5:30 to 10:30 p.m.; Thursdays through Saturdays, 5:30 to 11 p.m.; Sundays, 5:30 to 10 p.m.

CREDIT CARDS -- American Express, MasterCard, Visa.

RESERVATIONS -- Accepted only for six or more.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS -- Fully accessible.

IF YOU GO -- The restaurant is opposite City Hall, two blocks south of the Grove Street PATH station. By car, the PATH station is three-quarters of a mile south of the Holland Tunnel via Luis Muñoz Marin Boulevard.

RATINGS -- Poor, Fair, Satisfactory, Good, Very Good, Excellent, Extraordinary.

Ratings reflect the reviewer's reaction to food, ambience and service, with price taken into consideration. Menu listings and prices are subject to change.

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