

At Café Culinaire, sage gnocchi and cinnamon churros outstanding



Desserts from Café Culinaire at Bellingham Technical College. Clockwise from bottom, creme brulee made with Tony's Coffee, churros with dark-chocolate sauce, and blueberry financier with Meyer lemon ice cream. Kie Relyea krelyea@bhamherald.com

By Kie Relyea krelyea@bhamherald.com

Name: [Café Culinaire](#).

Location: The Campus Center building at Bellingham Technical College, 3028 Lindbergh Ave.

Quick bite: Weeks out from a leisurely and elegant lunch at Café Culinaire, I'm still savoring the memory of the pillowy gnocchi that came with the duck entree at this small eatery, which is essentially a lab for the college's graduating culinary students. They run the full-service restaurant, complete with linen tablecloths, and cook the meals using recipes created by BTC chef-instructor Brian McDonald.

There's a lot of attention paid to plating the food prettily and, like other restaurants, making sure diners know when there are locally grown or made ingredients, such as blue cheese from [Twin Sisters Creamery](#) and offerings from [Cascadia Mushrooms](#).

Reservations for the spring-only seating can be tough to get. This year, reservations for the entire spring openings were booked in 2-1/2 hours.

Diners can order a la carte or a three-course tasting menu — appetizer, main dish and dessert — for \$18.95. Drink options are tea, water or coffee, so I ordered French press coffee for \$2.50.

You can put your name on a wait list, in case someone cancels, by going to www.btc.edu/cafeculinaire and clicking on “Reserve Now.”

Prices are low, in part, because the student labor is free. I’m glad I brought an appetite because the portions were generous.

I dined one day with a friend, and we both selected the tasting menu, which, by the way, has changed from when we ate at the café April 13.

My starter was spot prawns from San Juan Island that had been dipped in a tempura batter and deep-fried. They were served over a Chinese long bean salad with a side of nuoc cham, a Vietnamese dipping sauce made with fish sauce that is salty and sweet. The prawns didn’t need the dipping sauce. They were perfectly cooked, the flesh slightly sweet and tender. And the vinaigrette on the beans was citrusy and refreshing, a perfect balance for the tempura.

For the entree, I picked the lavender-spiced duck breast in a thickened and sweet-savory sauce made with Whidbey’s Port and dried cherry. It came with sides of sauteed rainbow chard and kale and gnocchi flecked with sage. I love earthy fatty meat — chicken breast is like the spinach of the meat world to me; I eat it because it’s healthy — so I tucked into the duck with gusto. The skin on top was crispy, salty and luscious, though the duck itself was a tad overcooked.

But I was there for the spring quarter’s first seating so I was forgiving, especially after the first bite of the plump gnocchi. The lumps of Italian dumplings were buttery and edged with little crisps of cheese that I chased after. Just perfect.

My dining companion picked the organic arugula, ruby-red grapefruit and beet salad. It was bursting with color and flavor, the truffle lemon-thyme vinaigrette was just piquant enough to work with the peppery arugula and the slivers of nutty manchego cheese made by [Ring of Trees Farm](#).

Her cedar plank wild sockeye, caught by fisher [Nerka](#), came with a honey-roasted peach barbecue sauce on top. The sauce was sweet but not cloying, and she declared that she’d never had a better cooked salmon in town.

Dessert was actually two desserts on one plate. There was the creme brulee made with Tony’s Coffee, and cinnamon-sugar churros with a dark chocolate sauce for dipping. Oof. It was a lot, but both were well-executed. The churros were my favorite. The fried dough was light and airy.

I've eaten enough that were leaden and greasy to appreciate the deft touch here. Chocolate dipping sauce seems to be the complement for churros these days.

At first, I thought dipping churros into chocolate was overkill. But the cinnamon on the churros gave the sauce a Mexican-chocolate accent, and that I liked.

Her dessert was a moist blueberry financier, which is a small French cake, and it came with a velvety Meyer lemon ice cream.

Wait list: The café has fully booked its spring-quarter reservations, which end in early June. But you can put your name on a wait list, in case someone cancels, by going to www.btc.edu/cafeculinaire and clicking on "Reserve Now."