

Café Culinaire

CUISINE WITH CLASS

Story and photos by Amy Kepferle · Wednesday, May 5, 2010



We weren't on the reservation list—our names had gotten lost somewhere along the way—but on a recent afternoon at the crowded Café Culinaire, an extra table was brought in for us, and space was made.

Although we had to loiter in the lobby for a few minutes, it was worth the wait. By the time my tablemate and I were seated by the hostess a short time later, a spotless tablecloth had been laid, candles were lit and a wide-mouthed wineglass with a pink rhododendron blossom was placed just so.

As wait staff in starched white shirts and black ties hustled throughout the dining room, we perused the menu and took in the action. The room was full, and the food being brought out—which looked delicious and smelled even better—was plentiful. One long table featured two women wearing celebratory crowns. In the corner, an occasional flame rose up as the dessert chef prepared Bananas Foster with a mix of liquor, butter, cinnamon and fruit.

A quick look at the prices on the menu reminded us that, although it felt like we were in a high-end restaurant, we were actually at school. You see, Café Culinaire isn't a permanent eatery, but a temporary dining experience that sees the Bellingham Technical College's Culinary Arts students taking part in one of the most important "labs" in their training for six weeks each spring.

Under the supervision of chef instructors, the students not only prepare the dishes, but also utilize their skills and training to work at each station of the busy restaurant—and beyond. This means that, on a different day, the hostess who showed us to our table may well be the one laboring behind the scenes in the spacious kitchen, and vice versa.

The training pays off, as each graduate leaves the program with a better understanding of what it takes to not only feed patrons, but also to make sure their experience is pleasing on a variety of aesthetic levels.

Clean silverware and upbeat table service, however, will only take you so far where running a restaurant is concerned. If the food's no good, well, it's hard to make it work.

I'm happy to report Café Culinaire is, for the most part, offering enticing edibles comparable to its "real" counterparts. Although diners can pick and choose from the ala carte menu—\$2.95-\$3.95 for appetizers and \$6.25-\$7.95 for entrees—the best deal by far is a three-course tasting menu (appetizer, entrée and dessert) for a mere \$10.95.

I started my culinary explorations with the Kaffir lime and ginger tempura San Juan Island spot prawns, which were placed atop a Chinese long bean salad. Crunchy on the outside, the prawns were perfectly cooked and still moist and buttery on the inside. I parted with half a sizeable prawn for tastes of my date's three-soup sampler, and we agreed the cream of wild mushroom came out on top.

Sticking with a seafood theme, I chose a brochette of Alaskan Weathervane scallops and halibut with spicy Asian pesto and fresh soba noodles as my main course, while my companion went with the Ellensburg Double lamb chops with macadamia-coconut crust. (Other intriguing items that could've made it to our table: Twisted S. Ranch buffalo short ribs, blackberry marinated Draper Valley free range chicken breasts, Lummi Island cedar plank roasted salmon, and spring vegetable risotto.)

As my friend shared her dreams from the night before—a lot of which included exotic journeys with her cat—we dug into our entrees with zest. Again, the oceanic part of my meal was cooked to perfection; the seared scallops and halibut practically melted in my mouth. I never got a bite of the lamb chops, as they disappeared before I got a chance to ask (yes, I was tempted to gnaw on the bone)

When one of the "staff" came by to ask us how our meal was, though, I was compelled to tell him I'd been underwhelmed by the soba noodles, which proved to be bland (not spicy) and were clumped together. He took it in stride, and said he'd let that day's chef know, and that they appreciated the feedback.

At the end of the meal, I learned a little something myself as I watched the guy in the back whip up my Bananas Foster. He walked me through each step of preparation, then warned me to step back as he lit the concoction on fire. Back at the table, I dug in. The dessert earned an A+, and, with that, school was over for the day.