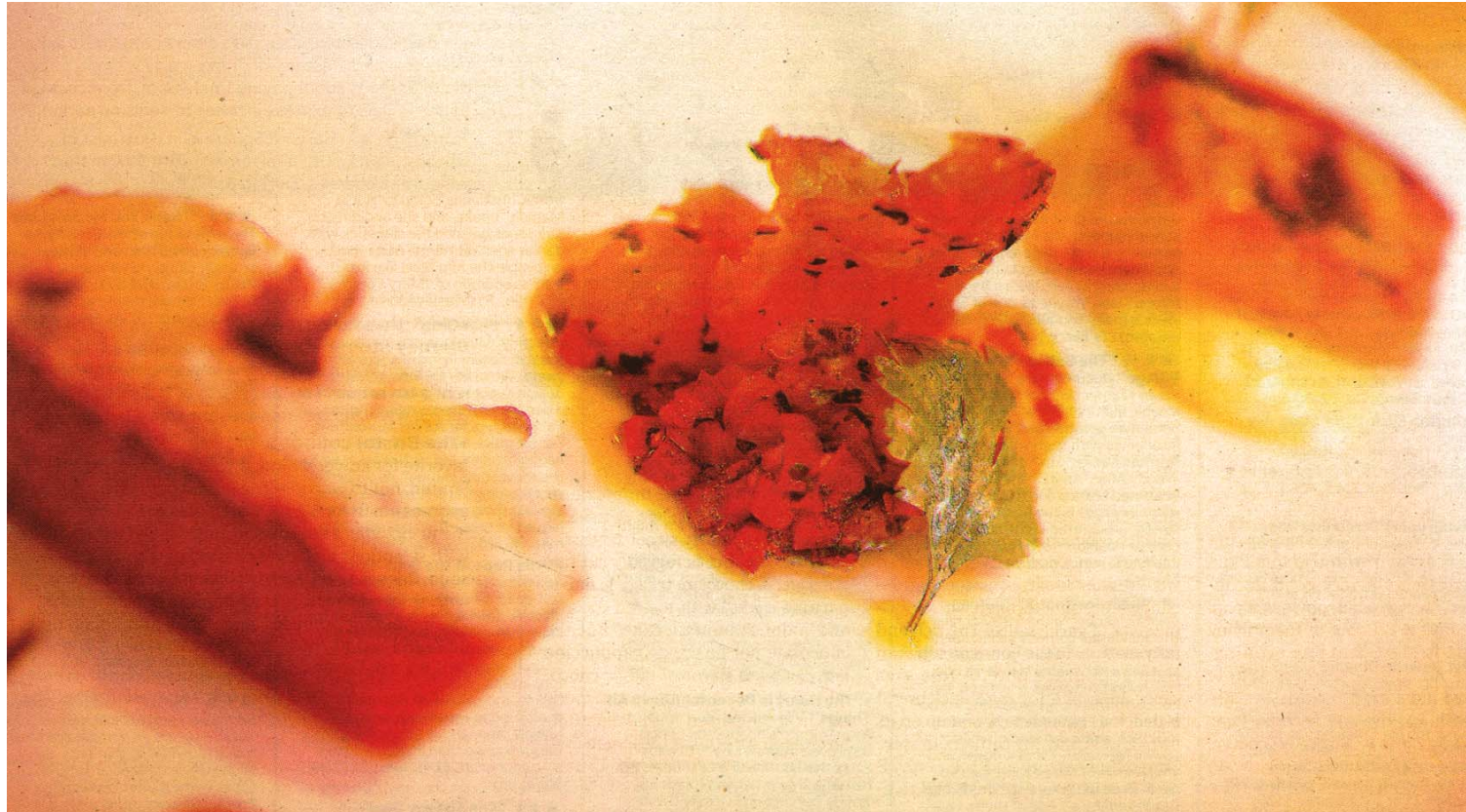


TASTE

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DINING OUT CHIARA

A welcoming bistro with some embellishments

BY ALISON ARNETT | GLOBE STAFF

The route from a country club kitchen to a fine dining restaurant is becoming ever more traveled. If you take Steve LaCount, who opened Chiara Bistro in Westwood in December, you can chart the advantages.

For one thing, he brought some of his diners with him. LaCount, who owns the 96-seat restaurant with his wife, Michelle, worked at The Country Club in Chestnut Hill for more than 30 years, 23 of them as executive chef. Having his own restaurant, LaCount says in a phone interview, “has been a lifelong dream.” He knew that Country Club members living in the area gave him an instant customer base. Plus, he says, all those years handling the many functions of a big country club gave him an organizational edge. He and his wife scoped out Westwood because their research showed good income demographics for an upscale restaurant in a spot that had little fine dining.

CHIARA ★★ ½

569 High Street, Westwood. 781-461-8118. All major cards. Fully accessible.

HOURS Sun 5:30–8:30pm, Mon–Thurs 5:30–9:30pm, Fri–Sat 5:30–10pm. Reservations accepted.

CUISINE Bistro, Mediterranean.

NOISE LEVEL Partitions and fabric dampen noise enough for conversation.

PRICES Appetizers, salads \$8–\$12; main courses \$23–\$30; desserts \$8–\$10. Entrees \$31–\$50.

MAY WE SUGGEST

Appetizer Three tastes of salmon: rillette on brioche, cilantro-cured gravlax, tarragon-mustard crusted rare salmon.

Main course Pan-roasted duck breast with foie gras sauce, cardamom-spiced carrots.

Dessert Hazelnut praline chèvre cheesecake

★★★★ Extraordinary | ★★★ Excellent | ★★ Very Good | ★ Good/Fair

So when the town changed the liquor licensing rules last year, the couple jumped in, finding a space that had once been a crafts store. The restaurant, designed by LDL Studios of Providence, has the scale, colors, and textures of a well-designed home. It's comfortable, with warm yellows and greens softening a basic rectangle; red wooden dividers provide a textural focus and help reduce noise. The kitchen is partly visible, but its noise and action aren't obtrusive. The wine list is accessible and not too high-end, but with some interesting bottles. And the greeting is warm and welcoming, though some of the niceties of service seem to be lacking, or at least slow in coming. One evening we have to ask several times for two more menus for our party of four; another evening it's knives, whisked away but not replaced until we flag down a hostess.

LaCount, who also has spent years teaching in Boston University's gastronomy program, and his chef de cuisine, Joe Rocco, who cooked with him at The Country Club, have a sure hand with their cuisine. It's a heady, rich style—no spa cuisine here—with plenty of butter-based sauces. And not only are the portions substantial, but embellishments mount up on the entrees: potatoes under swordfish topped with a “salad” of lump crabmeat and avocado and topped with thick, crisped slices of chorizo. Oh, and a rusty river of pimento sauce around the edges. The thick cut of swordfish is excellent, moist and flavorful; the crab and avocado salad with some greens is especially good with the swordfish, but the chorizo seems superfluous.

Sometimes the components are less lavish, or at least less numerous, but the effect is still rich. Asparagus soup, a lovely very-first-of-spring green, is swirled with lemon oil and crème fraîche. A very good deconstructed Caesar salad, obviously popular from the number of them flying past us in the room one evening, sports an eggy dressing, whole poached plum tomatoes, toasts slathered with an olive and anchovy tapenade, and curls of Reggiano cheese. It's satisfying and enough for two to share. A spinach and red frilly lettuce salad has a lovely light dressing, distinguishing itself before you get to the bleu d'Auvergne cheese, spiced almonds, and slices of French butter pears.

The best appetizer is a triptych of salmon, three small preparations on a pretty rectangle. Salmon rillette on brioche has a pleasing creaminess on the tongue, and gravlax on yellow tomato salsa boasts an acidic sprightliness. But the prize is a



The atmosphere at Chiara Bistro has the scale, colors, and textures of a well-designed home.

piece of barely cooked salmon crusted with tarragon and mustard and circled with a light stream of lemon aioli.

LaCount says that he concentrates on keeping the menu fairly short and very seasonal. With the sudden return of cool weather recently, braised veal osso bucco seems perfect, and Chiara's rendition is deeply layered with tender meat, tomatoes, and a winey sauce shot through with a creamy river of garlic sauce. The rich and fatty marrow in the bones on top is an indulgent grace note. A foie gras sauce underpinning roast duck breast is delicious enough to spoon up on its own, and luckily the cardamom spice on roasted carrots and the neutralness of lentils cut through the richness.

Big scallops arranged on a long plate exhibit an interesting yin-yang quality, a result of the contrast between their silky texture and sweetness with a topping of coriander and cumin. A lime beurre blanc sauce offers further contrasts, its soft tones against an almost-burnt taste of brick-red harissa oil. Marinated grilled skirt steak and another dish of thyme-crust chicken breast are the menu's less extroverted items, both nicely executed but with less richness. With its arugula salad and simple white-wine pan sauce, the chicken could almost qualify as spa food.

Desserts need some propping up. A hazelnut praline chèvre cheesecake has a

lovely, subtly sweet taste and good texture, but is raggedly cut into a wedge. A chocolate trilogy is fine in a truffle coated with toasted coconut and a dense mousse cake. But the chocolate pot de crème cappuccino lacks enough flavor of either chocolate or coffee. A lemon-mascarpone tart is accompanied with delightfully tart lemon sorbet, but the lemon curd is oddly not sweet enough. Usually desserts are too sweet, so it's doubly strange to encounter a couple that make me wonder if mistakes have been made. Perhaps the gelatos, which are very good, or even one of Chiara's alcohol-free drinks, such as the basil-tangerini, would be a better finish—the drinks in particular are a perfect offering for family dining, or for anyone who wants to enjoy a festive-looking drink without the punch of alcohol. It's a nice touch that reflects Chiara's sensibility of pleasing the customer rather than showing off. That's an attribute that probably helped LaCount's country club career and should serve him well at his own restaurant.