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Restaurant Review

Restaurant Review: DeLand's Cress

In Cress, DeLand lands itself a true dining destination

Heather McPherson

FOOD

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Something fresh and vibrant has arrived on our scene, and it's called Cress.

Dinners start with a complimentary amuse-bouche from the chef. On my first visit, the amuse was a cantaloupe sorbet. On a second visit, a juicy moscato grape was presented with blue cheese and nuts.

The menu is broken up into "small plates," which are appetizers and sides, "big plates," an evolving list of entrées, and "sweet plates," which you can figure out.

The star starters were the basil brie wontons (\$7, gently fried pouches oozing with herb-scented cheese, with mango chutney, a balsamic reduction and a pinch of microgreens) and the seared sea scallops (\$11, plump scallops with a ginger-flavored red pepper sauce).

For big plates, you can't miss with the intensely marbled Wagyu beef ribeye (\$35). Wagyu is on par with other prized Japanese beef; the meat was served with a truffled veal demiglace sauce, roasted exotic mushrooms and Yukon Gold potato fries.

The Moghlai free-range chicken curry (\$15) is the best buy, with steamed basmati rice, a pakora (fried vegetable fritter) and a cooling spinach raita (a yogurt-based sauce).

The surprise was the bisteya in puff pastry (\$16). This sweet entrée pleased the vegetarian at the table, who enjoyed its filling of caramelized roasted vegetables, cranberries, nuts, olives and capers. It came with an herbed couscous and a cardamom-cinnamon sauce.

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The Australian leg of lamb (\$19) was bathed in a fresh rosemary sauce and served with roasted vegetables and perhaps one of the best turns on grits I've had in awhile. Shiitake mushrooms and fresh thyme leaves were folded into cooked ground corn. The grits can also be ordered as a side dish for \$4.

From execution to presentation, entrees and appetizers were stunning. The only stumbles came at the end of the meal, and it might have been because two of the dessert offerings were so on the mark, the others had no chance. The raspberry crême brûlée (\$8) was OK but lacked that rich custard mouth feel. And the chocolate croissant bread pudding (\$7) was sweetly decadent but was missing the texture this staple should have.

Save room for the cardamom pumpkin cheesecake (\$8), an amazing balance of warm, earthy spices baked in a gingery crust. Or go right to the cheese composition (\$10), four chef-selected global bites of cheese.

What was most impressive about Cress was that every table was asked about food allergies and preferences. Also, the chef visits every table to ask about the meal. It's not a quick pass-through of the dining room: Chef Hari Pulapaka and his wife and business partner Dr. Jenneffer Pulapaka engage every guest. Service was good the first visit, impeccable the second.

The wine list is impressive and is driven by Cress' association with nearby Elusive Grape. All vegetables and herbs are organic and locally grown at the Cress Garden at DeLand's Planted Earth Vegetables (386-837-6855) by Nize Nylen.

But what is just as admirable is that Pulapaka is a tenured faculty member in the Department of Mathematics and Computer Science at Stetson University by day and at night mans the kitchen at Cress. His passion for cooking led him to enroll at the Orlando Culinary Academy. He has cooked at Kohinoor in Altamonte Springs and at the previous occupant of Cress' space, Le Jardin Cafe.

Dining on a budget

The "small plates" portions of the nightly menus offer satisfying noshes when paired with a house salad or a side dish.

Dinner under \$20: Provençal escargots (\$10), subtly garlicky snails cooked with chopped shallots, white wine, mushrooms, butter and peppery parsley, served with ciabatta and the Cress signature salad (\$7), a composition of microgreens, artisanal cheese and roasted grapes, or the Caesar salad twist (\$6), crisp romaine served with a hard-cooked quail egg and goat cheese.

Dinner for \$15: Seared sea scallops (\$11) and the shiitake thyme grits (\$4).

Cress Restaurant

Where: 103 W. Indiana Ave., DeLand.

When: dinner from 5:30 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday; lunch served 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Tuesday-Friday.

Reservations: Encouraged -- especially Friday and Saturday -- because the dining room is somewhat small.

Beverages: Wine and beer.

Sound level: Quiet with music audible but not overpowering.

Wheelchair access: Yes.

Entrees: \$13-\$35.

Credit: All major cards accepted.

Call: 386-734-3740.

Web: CressRestaurant .com.

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