

dining out

New chef helping all things 'Blossom'

BY DEIDRE SCHIPANI
The Post and Courier

There is a new chef in the kitchen at Blossom Cafe, launched by Hospitality Management Group Inc. (Thomas Parsell and chef Donald Barickman) in 1993.

This is coming full circle for chef Adam Close. He began his career, while studying at Johnson & Wales University, with chefs Barickman and Don Drake, went on to cook at Atlanta's Pano's and Paul's and Veni, Vedi, Vici restaurants and returned to Charleston to take the helm at Blossom.

He has thoughtfully kept popular menu items such as Steamed Mussels (\$8) and Crab Ravioli (\$19), brought back the Linguini With Littleneck Clams (\$22) and has added some dishes of his own.

You easily can make a meal out of the small plates on the menu. Combinations are inventive. Buttermilk Fried Calamari with a Charred Tomato Remoulade (\$10) and Beer Batter Shrimp with Grilled Pineapple Salsa and Tomato Marmalade (\$9) are examples.

The Pan Seared Scallops With Baby Artichoke Barigoule (\$13) are quintessentially Southern — if you are from the South of France. Sweet, plump, tender rounds of scallops are crusted from the heat of cracked peppercorns and a searing pan. They are served with a stew of artichokes, carrots, onions and herbs that were poached in olive oil's fruity goodness.

Tuna Carpaccio (\$13) wears a mantle of Southwest ingredients



with lime and avocado shaking off the traditional Italian standards of olive oil and Parmesan cheese.

Spinach and Artichoke Dip (\$7) is a perfect starter for larger groups.

The pizza (\$9-\$10) stays close to its roots save for the Sage Chicken and Caramelized Onion (\$10) with blue cheese, asparagus and grapes braised in red wine.

Salads feature the ABCs: Arugula with Caramelized Apples (\$9), Bibb with Lemon Shallot Vinaigrette (\$10) and Caesar (\$7). Portions are generous and salads can be easily shared.

Pastas are made in-house. We tried the Fettuccini with Spring Vegetables in Spicy Fra Diavolo Sauce (\$16). The Fettuccini felt rough on your tongue, a good sign of homemade pasta that provides a landscape of grooves to hold the sauce. The "primavera" of artichokes, asparagus, corn, onions, mushrooms, roast-

ed tomatoes and escarole was perfectly cooked. Each vegetable got its due, but the sauce was sweet, with none of the peppery vibrancy that characterizes this "brother devil" sauce. It was another ample portion that served two at dinner. In fact, we wish the pastas were available as half portions. They are obviously designed for the American appetite and not as a true pasta course.

Blossom sees itself as a seafood restaurant, and its entrees bear witness to this fact. No ordinary fillets here, but inventive and creative preparations from roulades to "steaks" and loins; roasted, grilled, wrapped or sauteed. From pickled leeks to French puy lentils, this is a kitchen taking care.

The menu acknowledges Blossom's partnership with Kennerty Farms and Split Creek Farms and the benefits of that relationship were seen and tasted in the vegetables.

It is difficult for a restaurant to be all things to all people but Blossom manages to do this. Tourists and locals, families and couples, large groups and small all appeared to be enjoying themselves and their meals — if clean plates are the criteria.

Service was exceptional. Our waiter had what I call "server eyes of excellence." He could be bringing drinks to one table but his eyes would inventory what was going on at all his tables. And on one of these sweeps, he observed a long delay between two of our courses. He immediately dispatched a manager to us, who then comped us for these dishes.

What Blossom does so well is the concept of shared ownership in your eating experience. It is why it is popular with both residents and tourists, why its bar is active, its courtyard filled and the tables turn on weekend nights.

It offers a nicely balanced assortment of wines by the half-bottle and remarkable range in the full-bottle selections.

Ice cream and sorbets (\$3.25 one scoop; \$5.50 for a double dip) are house made. The Vanilla Bean distilled the flavor of vanilla to its essence, while the Blackberry Sorbet was intense in color but faint in flavor. Ubiquitous Brulee keeps company with its sister Cheesecake. Tradition is served by White Chocolate Banana Pudding, and Chocolate Mousse is artfully presented on a foundation of fudge cake with Irish Cream Anglaise.

Blossom, the restaurant, bears no resemblance to blossom, the flower, whose life cycle is short and brief. This is a Blossom with a much longer lease.

Blossom Cafe

Night Out

PHONE: 722-9200.

ADDRESS: 171 East Bay St.

FOOD: ★★★★★

SERVICE: ★★★★★

ATMOSPHERE: ★★★★★

PRICE: \$\$-\$\$\$

COSTS: Appetizers \$7-\$13; soups and salads \$7-\$10; sides \$4; pizza \$9-\$10; pasta \$16-\$22; entrees \$19-\$30; desserts \$3.25-\$7

BAR: Full service bar. Wines by the glass, \$6.75-\$8.75.

HOURS: Lunch 11 a.m.-3 p.m.; Sunday brunch 11 a.m.-2:30 p.m.; dinner Thur.-Sun. 4-10 p.m.; Fri. and Sat. 4 p.m.-midnight.

THURSDAY NIGHT BAR SPECIALS: 5-9 p.m., \$5 appetizers; half-price wines by the glass and domestic beers.

DECIBEL LEVEL: Moderate.

VEGETARIAN ALTERNATIVES: Yes.

CREDIT CARDS: All major cards.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS: Yes.

PARKING: Lot next to restaurant available after 11 a.m. on Saturday, Sunday, holidays. After 5 p.m. Mon.-Fri.

SMOKING: Bar only. Smoke-free in June.

RESERVATIONS: Suggested.

ON THE WEB: www.magnolias-blossom-cypress.com.

RESTAURANT FACTS: Rating criteria include quality and presentation of food, service and ambiance, while taking into consideration the type of restaurant — elegant, night out or neighborhood favorite.

WHAT THE STARS MEAN: ★ Fair, ★★ Average, ★★★ Good, ★★★★ Excellent, ★★★★★ Extraordinary

PRICE: \$ least expensive, \$\$\$\$ most expensive