



Sign up for our e-newsletter


[HOME](#)[CURRENT ISSUE](#)[HOME + GARDEN](#)[EVENTS](#)[FOOD + DINING](#)[SHOPPING](#)[HEALTH + BEAUTY](#)[ATLANTIC CITY](#)

## Restaurants

[Restaurant & Dining Guide](#)

## Restaurant Serenade

**City:** Chatham**County:** Morris County**Phone:** 973.701.0303**Price:** \$\$\$**Cuisine:** French**Key:** Full Review

## Serenade

\* \* \* \*

6 Roosevelt Ave.

Chatham

973.701.0303

[restaurantserenade.com](http://restaurantserenade.com)

Chef James Laird has been working his oven mitts off in boiling-hot kitchens since he was 14, when he began juggling high school, a girlfriend, five nights a week of cooking, and two breakfast shifts on the weekends. "I just always liked working," he says in an earnest, matter-of-fact manner. And work he has—at the River Café in Brooklyn, then at Aureole and Lespinasse in Manhattan, followed by a six-month stint at Michelin three-star Georges Blanc in Vonnas, France, and then back home to New Jersey to work at the renowned Ryland Inn in Whitehouse. As the Ryland Inn's sous-chef at the seasoned age of 25, he hovered over fellow Culinary Institute of America alum Nancy Sheridan, then 38 and working as a garde-manger intern (lingo for working on the cold side of the kitchen), until she agreed to go out with him. Their relationship blossomed into a marriage and a partnership: Together they opened Restaurant Serenade in 1996.

Nearly a decade later Serenade still feels new or, more accurately, timeless. Perhaps it's the moonlight pouring in from the two-story windows in the main dining room, or the flickering fires in both the lower dining room and the grand bar room, which is often appointed with floral arrangements 10 feet high. Nancy, who runs the front of the house with charm, drives to Chelsea's flower district every week to handpick the exotic blooms that decorate her domain.

The food is also timeless. Laird's months in Europe taught him that some recipes never need tweaking. He also learned to match what's on the plate with the season outside. In summer his presentations are bright, featuring yellows, reds, and purples, while in winter they employ darker, earthier shades. The one unifying quality is the sprinkling of something fresh and green. One night in the summer, a special seared quail sat in a nest of sautéed wild spinach, around which Laird spooned tomatoes stewed in a heady Provençal mixture of garlic, olives, parsley, and thyme. It was stunning and harmonious in both presentation and flavor, just like every single plate I've ever eaten at Serenade.

What do you get when you barbecue a slab of fresh bacon? You get a tender piece of pork that tastes like it was basted with fat instead of sporting it—which is how it was prepared here, Asian style, with pungent kimchi-stuffed

dumplings and pickled ramps. Amazing.

A glistening mound of yellowfin tuna tartare proffered with a refreshing mango compote and phyllo chips for slathering was a symphony of textures: silky, crunchy, salty, and sweet. An expertly seared Hudson Valley foie gras was meaty and savory, with a sweet-and-sour cherry-berry compote—a classic.

Laird's fish dishes are beautifully crisped on the outside and moist within. We enjoyed the roasted sea bass and pan-seared halibut one night—the former perfumed with sage, the latter bathed in a zippy Thai broth. Bacon made a welcome encore appearance tossed with crispy potatoes and chanterelles to accompany a juicy grilled hanger steak that was the essence of beefy. A roasted rack of lamb, delicious on its own, took on another dimension of flavor by way of a Basque pipérade sauce comprised of peppers, onions, garlic, and tomatoes, with just a kiss of jalapeno heat. Although such a sauce is classically served with cod or halibut, here it complemented the lamb as if the dish were always made this way.

Both the cheese and dessert menus include wine pairings, a nice touch. Beverage director Craig Kallus does a fine job in the role of sommelier, answering questions with aplomb and making suggestions only when encouraged.

Not surprisingly, Laird makes the desserts, too. A warm, flourless chocolate tart embraced in a pecan crust was delightful, while the Valrhona chocolate brownie revealed a touch of whimsy as he placed a vanilla ice cream-stuffed profiterole on top, making for a dazzlingly rich but refreshing riff on the sundae. Well done.

