

July 13, 1997

RESTAURANTS

Serious Romance

By FRAN SCHUMER

CHATHAM— BOTH my mother-in-law, a chemist, and my mother, who shops, dislike Mother's Day. The crowds, the corsages and the fuss made by maitres d'hotel they don't know embarrass them. They would just as soon skip town and return the next day.

They felt differently, however, after their special Mother's Day dinner at Restaurant Serenade. James Laird, formerly the sous-chef at the Ryland Inn, and Nancy Sheridan Laird, who assisted in the inn's four-star kitchen, served filet mignon and chocolates in such a low-key manner that even my mother was impressed. "It didn't feel anything like Mother's Day," she said the next morning.

The Lairds, who are married, also serve wonderful dinners on ordinary occasions. A Saturday, perhaps, is an even nicer time to visit the restaurant, and not necessarily with your mother. Serenade is romantic in a grown-up way, and it's also a place where people do business. And I can't think of anyone who wouldn't enjoy the food. It's the kind of light, modern French cooking perfected by restaurants like Jean Georges in Manhattan, and it's reasonably priced, at least by midtown standards.

How nice, too, that you can park here. The cedar-shingle exterior was aubergine when the restaurant was opened by Paul Butler, the original owner, and it remains aubergine and beautiful. Inside, the cathedral ceiling and great Palladian window still lighten the central dining room, and the abundance of calla lilies and allium keep it and the other two seating areas rich, fragrant, colorful and warm. It's still a marvelous dining room.

So what's different? I never ate here when Dennis Foy was the chef, but I love Mr. Laird's dishes. At 28, he is one of the best classically trained chefs in New Jersey, and like his mentor, Craig Shelton of the Ryland Inn, he is fanatical about produce. The salmon he served on Mother's Day was buried in morels from Basking Ridge, and more recently a rabbit dish featured fava beans from Mr. Shelton's organic garden in Whitehouse. Is it any wonder summer is his favorite season?

Also like his mentor, Mr. Laird is scrupulous about wine. His list is small, but each of its selections, which are mostly French and American, go with at least two or three entrees. The St. Auben (Les Cortons) Marc Colin white burgundy is perfect with fish and vegetables, and the St. Emilion Clos de La Cure bordeaux is a good match for meat and a bargain at \$26. Or ask your server for advice. The prices, from \$19 to \$60, are reasonable, and the staff is knowledgeable and low-key.

Choosing an appetizer is also challenging. The asparagus soup is rich, despite being creamless, and bold, even though the strongest herb in it is gentle tarragon. A native of Middlesex, Mr. Laird naturally uses local asparagus, but fortunately he isn't so loyal when it comes to other ingredients. His crab meat, a bonus in the soup, comes from Rod Mitchell of Maine (the Saks Fifth Avenue of seafood purveyors), and the tiny cherry tomatoes are flown in from Florida. They're called Baby 100's because it takes that many to make a pound. They're heavenly.

The veal ravioli wrappers are so deliciously delicate that you can actually see the vegetables inside them, and the sashimi of Hawaiian tuna is lush. But the highlight among the appetizers is the spring vegetables are even better. There are 17, including familiar ones like yellow beets, fava beans, sweet peas and purple scallions, and many that are an utter mystery. They are, separately and collectively, marvelous and dressed in a vinaigrette sweetened with toasted coriander pods. If you've ever dozed in a field of lavender, you'll recognize the fragrance.

The main courses aren't so consistently satisfying. The lamb is gamy, and the veal is tough. The rabbit, on the other hand, is tender. Mr. Laird describes his filet mignon as the "one ordinary dish" on the menu, but it's a wonderful kind of ordinary, rare and juicy, and comes with Jersey asparagus. Only his chicken is better. The great stalks of caramelized fennel around it make it a perfect summer meal.

Desserts are the same combination of rich and delicate. The strawberry-rhubarb tart tingles with gingery custard, and the petit

fours are a grown-up cookie-lover's dream, beautiful diamonds and circles of rum-soaked raisins, Grand Marnier ganache and caramelized almonds painted with chocolate. As for the raspberry white chocolate ice cream, even a Francophile like Mr. Laird can evoke its texture only with an American name: Fluffernutter.

When the Lairds first worked together, Mrs. Laird refused to go on a date with Mr. Laird, not only because he was 12 years younger but because he was her employer. Fortunately, she changed her mind, and their very different talents -- he cooks; she handles the people and the flowers -- enhances the restaurant's appeal.

Mr. Laird entered the business for a much more practical reason. "Who else but restaurant industry would hire people below age 16?" he asked. His inspiration during the next 12 years was always the same: to honor his mother, who struggled as a single parent and a secretary to support Mr. Laird and his sister.

"Is she proud of you?" he was asked.

"Oh, very," he answered.

"How do you know?"

"Well, I'm skinny, and my mother's even skinnier. She's 5-7 and weighs 90 pounds. But when she eats in the restaurant, her plate always comes back empty."

Restaurant Serenade

6 Roosevelt Avenue, Chatham

(201) 701-0303

EXCELLENT

ATMOSPHERE Class act.

SERVICE Same.

RECOMMENDED DISHES Spring vegetables; asparagus soup; veal ravioli; filet mignon; braised rabbit; chicken with caramelized fennel; strawberry-rhubarb tart; raspberry white chocolate ice cream; petits fours.

PRICE RANGE Lunch: appetizers, \$6 to \$9; entrees, \$11 to \$14; desserts, \$7. Dinner: appetizers, \$7 to \$15; entrees, \$17 to \$28; desserts, \$9.

HOURS Lunch: Mondays through Fridays, noon to 2 P.M. Dinner: Mondays through Fridays, 6 to 9:30 P.M.; Saturdays, 5:30 to 10 P.M.

RESERVATIONS Recommended.

CREDIT CARDS

All major.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS Everything on one level.

RATINGS Poor to Satisfactory, Good, Very Good, Excellent,

Extraordinary.

Ratings reflect the reviewer's reaction to food, ambiance and service, with price taken into consideration. Menu listings and prices are subject to change.

Photo (Norman Y. Lono for The New York Times)