

March 16, 2003

RESTAURANTS

## RESTAURANTS; Sweet Taste of Success

By DAVID CORCORAN

**CHATHAM**— JAMES AND NANCY SHERIDAN LAIRD opened Restaurant Serenade six and a half years ago, taking over a space whose best-known previous occupant was the highly regarded Townsquare Inn. Mr. Laird, the chef, was just 27, a Middlesex County native who had been cooking since his mid-teens and had risen to sous-chef at the Ryland Inn in Whitehouse, by common consent the state's most distinguished restaurant.

The early notices were rapturous. But given the tendency of young chefs to move along, and the tendency of brilliant new restaurants to flame out like meteors, the question was whether Serenade could sustain its success. By now, it has entered middle age (even if its 33-year-old chef has not), and it seemed time to go see how it was holding up.

The answer, in two words, is just fine. Serenade (pronounced seh-re-NAHD, in the French way) is still one of the state's most inviting dining spaces. It inhabits an L-shaped dark-shingled house in the understatedly pricey downtown section of Chatham, a corner of the megalopolis that is trying very hard to be Vermont. The entrance, up a flight of steps, gives way to a bar and sitting room warmed in winter by a crackling fire and in every season by the welcome of the staff, led by Mrs. Laird. The dining rooms are alive with fresh flowers -- huge yellow tulips, on our visits -- and the sounds of conversation purr like a Lexus. The main room, where we were lucky enough to be seated each time, is dominated by a cathedral ceiling and a vast Palladian window.

All that has been true from the start, as have the quality and tenor of Mr. Laird's highly seasonal French- and Asian-inspired menu.

I can think of two things that have changed, both of them highly pertinent if you are planning to spend your own money here. One is to your right as you enter: a life-size painting of the chef, commissioned by the Robert Mondavi Winery when he won its Culinary Award of Excellence in 2000. That honor speaks to Mr. Laird's stature in the wider culinary world and to the ambition of his wine list. When Serenade opened, the list was well chosen but short. Now it is short only on bargains.

The other change is in the right-hand column of the menu. In 1997, our reviewer Fran Schumer called Serenade "reasonably priced, at least by Midtown standards." Dinner entrees were \$17 to \$28. Today they are \$26 to \$35 (with seven of the nine choices over \$30), and six-course tasting menus with matching wines are \$110 to \$120. All of which makes it worthwhile to take advantage of a little-advertised feature of Serenade: lower prices and unreserved seating in that cozy firelighted bar.

So has Serenade earned the right to charge Midtown prices and number itself among the Bernardins and Babbos of the world? For the most part, it has. Mr. Laird sets the right tone with opulent amuse-bouches -- perhaps sautéed scallops with red-pepper coulis and a black-truffle potato chip, or a bit of Gulf shrimp with roasted beets, or, in a generous and unexpected touch, one of these for you, the other for your partner.

Among the appetizers we tried, there were two unaccountable lapses: crab cakes in the shape of elfin towers looked charming but were overworked and overbreaded; and honey-glazed grilled shrimp in an Asian marinade were stingingly salty. But once those were behind us, the levels of quality and interest were consistently high. Fried Maine oysters with seaweed salad and a soy-ginger mignonette are the stuff of cravings, a perfect match of sweet and plump, crunchy and astringent. The Roquefort in the endive salad (with pecans and shaved pear) is a cheese course in itself.

On the tasting menu one Saturday night was a small pile of seared yellowfin tuna in a crust of black and white sesame seeds with bok choy and shiitake mushrooms. It was as good as this familiar dish gets; mating it with a velvety white Condrieu from the Rhône made it even better. Juniper-crusting venison is matched with sweet-potato purée, braised red cabbage and a crisp spiced wafer -- and, on the tasting menu, a howitzer blast of merlot from Duckhorn Vineyards. A mélange of wild mushrooms were arranged over creamy truffled polenta like some empyrean version of bangers and mash.

Rack of lamb is splendid here, tender, buttery and infused with garlic, adrift in a green estuary of mint purée. Filet mignon is given textural and flavor interest by a crown of braised hen-of-the-woods mushrooms. Fish, too, are beautifully handled. Seared king salmon is brilliantly matched with grilled fennel and pomegranate molasses; flaky John Dory comes with beets, fingerling potatoes and pancetta. Then there is barramundi, a new one on me, a wonderfully mild, perchlike fish that swims among the mangroves of northwestern Australia.

The cheese course, while varied and enticing, is surprisingly ungenerous, with small helpings of cheese to go with a big stack of sliced brioche. Other desserts pass the value-for-money test, notably a hot Linzer torte that sits under a whimsical spun-sugar catwalk connecting a puff of raspberry mousse and a small heap of raspberries. A pairing of chocolate and raspberry sorbets was fabulously rich and flavorful.

Service is attentive, though it can feel brittle and overrehearsed, a common failing at New Jersey's high-end restaurants, where too few staff members have mastered the art of seeming relaxed without actually relaxing. The sommelier, Mark Cantu, has obviously been given a free hand with the wine, and he presides over it with great skill and authority. The same can be said of James and Nancy Laird and their restaurant, a place that gleams like Tiffany's -- and, like Tiffany's, shows what good money can buy.

#### Restaurant Serenade

6 Roosevelt Avenue, Chatham

(973) 701-0303

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

#### EXCELLENT

ATMOSPHERE -- Opulent and welcoming, the living room of your dreams.

SERVICE -- Attentive but often overly formal.

SMOKING -- Not allowed.

WINE LIST -- Diamond-studded.

RECOMMENDED DISHES -- Maine oysters, endive salad; venison, filet mignon, rack of lamb, wild mushrooms; John Dory, king salmon, barramundi, yellowfin tuna; Linzer torte, sorbets.

PRICE RANGE -- Lunch: salads, \$7; entrees, \$13 to \$16; desserts, \$7. Dinner: appetizers, \$10 to \$19; entrees, \$26 to \$35; desserts, \$9. Weekend prix fixe, \$59. Six-course tasting menus, \$75 to \$85 (\$110 to \$120 with matching wines). Bar snacks, \$6 to \$16.

HOURS -- Closed Sundays. 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.

CREDIT CARDS -- All major cards.

RESERVATIONS -- Recommended; seating in the bar is first come, first served.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS -- Accessible rear entrance, with about a dozen tables and restrooms on the main level.

IF YOU GO -- Almost directly west of lower Manhattan, Chatham is in southeastern Morris County. From Highway 24, take Exit 7B/A toward Highway 124 west, which quickly becomes Main Street in Chatham. Roosevelt Avenue is the first right after the traffic light at University Avenue.

RATINGS -- Poor, Fair, Satisfactory, Good, Very Good, Excellent, Extraordinary. Ratings reflect the reviewer's reaction to food, ambience and service, with price taken into consideration. Menu listings and prices are subject to change.

Photo (Jill C. Becker for The New York Times)