

Princeton's elements filled with substance and style

by Cody Kendall/The Star-Ledger
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elements
163 Bayard Lane, Princeton

Dinner: 5:30-10 p.m.
Mondays-Thursdays, 5:30-11 p.m.
Fridays-Saturdays, 5-9 p.m. Sundays.

Full bar.
Major credit cards.
Business casual dress.
Wheelchair accessible.
Reservations recommended:
(609) 924-0078.
www.elementsprinceton.com.

THREE AND A HALF STARS

The excitement generated by elements, Princeton's newest restaurant, revs up in the parking lot. The walk to the entrance of the stone and steel building takes you by the glass-enclosed gleaming kitchen, a view guaranteed to create both anticipation and envy as you pass guests busy with treats at the two chef's tasting tables.

The restaurant begins its name with a lower-case "e," but it should be spelled out in all capitals to reflect the buzz associated with this place, which opened last month just a short drive from the Princeton University campus.

The sophisticated interior, with its glass panels and wood trim, comes across as modern but not stark, and attractive in its clean lines. The main dining room is backed by a cube of frosted glass, a private dining area; there also are tables on the mezzanine level. Noise is the downside, as sound bounces off the hard surfaces. For a place of this caliber and price points, I'd prefer fewer decibels.

Aside from that, elements is quite an impressive experience, with the kind of food you'll talk about long after you leave. The chef and co-owner is Scott Anderson, whose previous appearance in Princeton was at Les Copains. His life in a variety of environments -- Japan, Florida and the American West -- and at a variety of restaurants gives him a wide-ranging perspective. He also cooked at Nova Terra in New Brunswick and the old Ryland Inn. Sous chef Joe Sparatta, another Ryland Inn alum who worked with Anderson at the Lawrenceville Inn down the road from Princeton, logged New York experience with chef David Bouley and at Le Bernardin.

The high-powered kitchen produces food billed as "interpretive American cuisine," which offers numerous possibilities from the melting pot and a long line-up of unusual ingredients that may require some interpretation of their own for the average patron. Luckily, our server was schooled for that task. A font of knowledge, he offered intimate details about the preparation as well, and had the opportunity to consistently exercise his knowledge as questions came flying his way.

Bigeye tuna (\$42) doesn't require an explanation, but not everyone has a clue about the identity of chermoula, the Moroccan marinade that makes this fish different. Salsify (the oyster-flavored root and a member of the sunflower family) and miatake (hen-of-the-wood mushrooms), elements of the skate dish (\$23) may also mystify, but definitely will satisfy in this bargain preparation, which includes spinach and bacon. It was a successful effort to elevate this sea denizen beyond its own essence. Cardoon potage (\$10) is a soup made with a relative of the artichoke, mellow with potato and a hint of truffle. A fried oyster wrapped in phyllo dough adds a touch that is both crunchy and juicy.

On the purely American side, there are a few dishes for which no clarification is necessary. The Griggstown chicken (\$28) is a tribute to southern cooking, with a smattering (not enough, in my view) of barbecue sauce, collard greens cooked just right, a little rectangle of corn bread, and crispy skin distributed in tiny shreds, rather than intact. Suckling pig (\$30) is underlined by bacon and mustard, with fingerling potatoes and Brussels sprouts dressing it up.

But it's a good old beef dish that is the standout here. The 48-hour short rib (\$32) is seasoned, packaged in plastic film and cooked in a heated water bath that reduces shrinkage and intensifies flavor. It's a progression of traditional techniques involving relatively low heat and sealed vessels (think of cooking in clay pots or parchment wrapping.) These short ribs, served sliced and medium rare, were amazing for both their tender consistency and spirit, practically disintegrating at the touch of a fork. Nameko mushrooms, gnocchi and cipollini onion were definitely a low-key sideshow in comparison to the main event on this plate. The size of this dish was enormous; plenty to share and even make a convert of the adamant anti-short rib person at our table. She had quite an epiphany on her visit to elements. Also an anti-monkfish person, she changed her tune on that one, too, after tasting the local monkfish (\$25), cooked to just the right degree, which is essential for this fish to manifest its lobster-like flavor. A vivid Romesco sauce and heirloom beans, a touch of rye, perfect Toscano kale and porcini mushrooms completed the picture.

Although not every portion of every item is as large as that of the short rib entree (and some are diminutive), the cumulative effect of three courses should satisfy hunger. There's a little complimentary chef's appetizer to start, such as a langoustine broth with two tiny house-made potato chips. The bread basket is filled with produced-on-the-premises items that include lovely foccaccia and a choice of breadsticks, firm or feathery.

Going further afield from well-decorated mainstream American concepts is an outstanding Thai pumpkin soup (\$12), sparked by just the right concentration of coconut and lemongrass to make the taste of an old favorite sensational and new.

Calamari and sardine (\$12) is a tribute to Italy with tomato, fennel and olives contributing their character.

Langoustine tartare (\$14) featured raw translucent bits of this crustacean, which had a jelly-like consistency. It certainly was different, but it's not a dish for everyone. A more acceptable seafood alternative for some might be the Spanish mackerel (\$12), with miso, mustard and seaweed adding to a temperament already enhanced by smoke.

Vegetarians who don't eat fish will find their options among the appetizers, such as the cavatelli (\$14) with porcini mushrooms and black truffles or the wild mushroom crepes (\$12) highlighted by celery root and Swiss chard, as well as the lure of black truffle and New Jersey tomme cheese.

There's no doubt that elements is expensive. This isn't the kind of place where you're likely to drop in several times a week. It's definitely something more than just the answer to "I don't feel like cooking tonight." The \$75 price tag on the Kobe ribeye certainly is daunting, but don't let it deter you. I've already cited two fish dishes for \$25 and less, and there are a few more choices in the \$30 and under range.

The wine list also accommodates a considerate price span for a place of this nature, with a few bottles available for less than \$30 and a good selection of wine by the glass for under \$10. Imaginative cocktails are \$11 and beautifully served.

Where the interpretive American approach doesn't always work is in the dessert category. The barely-felt presence of Thai basil and Turkish spices didn't set a jelly doughnut with raspberry filling much apart from what you'd get at Dunkin' Donuts, aside from the \$10 price tag. The "Chipwich" had quotes around its name in the menu, but was rather a standard issue ice cream sandwich featuring chocolate chip cookies and a sprinkling of dark chocolate on the outskirts of the ice cream. A small cup of hot chocolate with marshmallows was a nice additional touch, but again, the \$10 price tag seemed out of whack.

The 24-hour apple pie (\$10) lacked the hint of crispness I like in my apple pie, but considering the apples' long sojourn in the oven, they still had some texture and a swirl of different notes from cinnamon, vanilla lemon thyme and Balinese peppercorns. Devotees of cheesecake (\$11) can have their fix with a version featuring Sicilian pistachios and brown butter, while the carrot cake (\$10) doesn't go too far afield from the basics with creamy frosting and ginger, on a plate decorated with paper-thin carrot crisps and a tiny, pale baby carrot.

I got the feeling elements was trying a little too hard to be different as it unites its elements of "food, service and environment," but perhaps that's understandable with a place seeking to make a wow of a first impression. The menu and the restaurant's personality have the potential to evolve nicely, as elements relaxes and picks up a rhythm for its identity. Meanwhile, there are joys aplenty that make a visit to this newcomer worthwhile for the well-heeled.

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