

What's New in Princeton & Central New Jersey?
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Let's Try...Elements
by E.E. Whiting

Haute Cuisine: Chef Scott Anderson

New York dining, in all its glory, has come to Princeton. Your first clue that this will be no ordinary dinner date is the dramatically different, ultra-modern structure on Bayard Lane. Enter its sleek interior and you are surrounded by stone and steel, glass and wood, all in subdued tones. The architecture and the presentation of the food is a much a part of the decor as the modern art on the walls.

Elements is clearly a showcase for the chef, Scott Anderson, and his team. The theater begins even before you see the menu. The main dining room is not large and was well-populated when we arrived at 8 p.m. the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. Open only a month, they have been heartily received so heed the need to make a reservation. Not only do you get a call to confirm your table the day before but an E-mail as well. The maitresse d' made us feel she was waiting for us eagerly.

The bar, which is more of a waiting area with a handful of stools rather than a belly-up gathering place, provides the first entertainment — with a bartender who is clearly intent on creating cocktails with care. His interests lie not only with the new concoctions but with resurrecting the golden libations of the 19th and early 20th century. Prepared with modern, highly crafted liquors, classics like a Sidecar take on a whole new life. Cocktails are \$11 and beers run the gamut from \$6 to exotic imports over \$20.

The menu is deliberately small and the food is the medium by which chef Anderson creates his pieces. The creativity of startling combinations of texture and taste is evident. The presentation makes you stop and appreciate the careful preparation of each dish, something diners have been missing at many restaurants which focus on quantity. Less is clearly more, but don't expect the caricature of a single bean artfully arranged North to South on the plate. The portions are just right.

Careful thought has gone into the presentation. The fall vegetable salad is a case in point. Fresh autumn fare is arranged to appear as though growing out of "soil" of forbidden rice and black couscous. Surprising combinations are evident in the Cardoon soup, which raises potato soup to a new level with the addition of truffles and oysters. Each dish is a testament to taste, deconstructed and lovingly reconstructed.

Appetizers, cold and warm, are in the \$12 range and entrees run from around \$20 to a rather startling \$75 for Kobe steak. We opted for roast pig, a medley of porcine delights from tiny chops to crispy



pork belly, and Colorado lamb, focusing on delicate chops cooked as requested, lamb sausages, and a lamb terrine.

The wine list is extensive and, while it ranges to breathtaking heights, there are many bottles that are more accessible. The difference at Elements (the restaurant's logo is with a lower case "e") is the attention to the pairing of the wines with the food and realization that whites and reds should be served at roughly the same temperature. Our Merlot was cool from the "cave" upstairs and the taste was refreshingly different from similar wines served at room temperature.

Desserts are as imaginative as the rest of the menu. For simple joy there is the Chipwich served with a demitasse of mole with homemade marshmallows and for intellectual delight there is the faux pumpkin pie made with, of all things, persimmons.

While there may be a perception that Elements reaches for the upper end of the luxury spectrum at a time when people are rethinking the excesses of the past, it in reality offers a rich dining experience that does not have to break the bank. It is upscale cuisine, creatively prepared. Our meal, which included cocktails, wine, appetizers, and a shared dessert totaled about \$150. An appealing evening could also be had for much less.

The venue also showcases the kitchen, which is open for all to view the creation of the "art" on the plates. What is noticeable is the quiet efficiency of the crew. They go about their jobs with collegial silence.

In addition to the dining room, there is a private room that is separated by sliding doors, providing an oasis for parties of six to eight. An upstairs seating area can accommodate meetings or parties of up to 12 or so comfortably.

The website, www.elementsprinceton.com, explains the focus on local produce. The blog has pictures and stories behind the food.

While the website encourages "smart casual" dress we did notice that most diners were not so attired. Casual jeans and tee shirts are apparently considered smart in our society. The main dining room was noisier than we would have expected and an intimate conversation was difficult. At one point I had to ask the server to come closer in order to be able to hear his very interesting description of a dish. The night we visited the parking lot was full, but we simply drove a few hundred feet further down Bayard Lane to the new Bank of Princeton and parked there. Stephen Distler, the owner of Elements, is also a principal at the bank.

Elements provides distinctive dining daily for dinner only and the kitchen is open until 11 p.m. on Friday and Saturday nights, nice to know for after the theater. But in truth, elements is a theatrical destination of its own. The art is comprehensive and all the senses engaged. It provides a complete night out with friends or that special someone who appreciates the sights and smells and tastes of fine food.

Elements, 163 Bayard Lane, Princeton, 609-924-0078, www.elementsprinceton.com. Dinner Monday through Thursday, 5:30 to 10 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 5:30 to 11 p.m.; and Sunday, 5 to 9 p.m. Holiday brunch, Sundays until New Year's, 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.