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elements crafts interpretive American cuisine

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By **SUSAN SPRAGUE YESKE**

It's easy to spot executive chef Scott Anderson in the open kitchen at elements, Princeton's new upscale restaurant. He's the one who rarely stops moving.

During his seven-days-a-week schedule, he's either working at one of the kitchen stations assembling a meal or checking a plate full of food before it makes its way out to the dining room.

Anderson watches everything and misses little in the restaurant he owns with partner Stephen Distler. Elements, which opened in October, is a reflection of the knowledge Anderson has accumulated during his years in the restaurant business.

"I wanted to create something that was very personal to me," says Anderson, whose lengthy resume includes time spent at the Ryland Inn in Whitehouse Station, as well as Teresa's, Mediterra and Les Copains in Princeton Borough and Lawrenceville Inn in Lawrence.

Anderson's stamp is evident at elements, a contemporary structure of wood, glass and stone, where he has written every menu except for desserts, a job he entrusts to sous chef Joseph Sparatta.

"I've pretty much gotten everything I've wanted here," he says. That includes decor featuring natural materials and private dining areas, a sizeable staff and a menu he calls interpretive American cuisine.

The menu changes with the seasons and varies slightly from day to day. Anderson buys as many foods as possible locally.

Before the appetizers were served, the ample and well-trained staff brought an unexpected but welcome amuse-bouche from the chef -- a slice of baguette topped with cool sweet kielbasa and mushroom paired with a tiny cup of hot miso and tuna soup. Sweet vs. salty and cool vs. steamy provided a nice contrast to start the meal.

Menu items at elements have short names, just a word or two. An appetizer called sardine, \$12, included several that were freshly cooked and deboned, prepared with minimal saltiness to allow the taste of the fish to come through.

A bowl of cardoon soup, \$10, was rich and creamy, perfect for a cold evening. Hints of potato and truffle came through, although the dominant flavor of the soup was the mild sweetness of the cardoon, a cousin of the artichoke that isn't often found on American menus. But what raised the dish above the level of a nice bowl of soup was an accompanying oyster, fabulously cooked in a crunchy bird's-nest style web and served perched on the edge of the bowl....