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Elements Defies the Usual Boundaries of Fine Dining

Sometimes rather than finding a restaurant, the restaurant finds me. At least that's my history with Elements in Princeton, New Jersey, when one day I noticed that people were linking to the OA blog from the restaurant's website. Curious about who was sending referrals my way, I contacted the restaurant to find out who they were. A few days later I received a response telling me they had recently opened, and in the correspondence that followed I found out that they were trying to model themselves after Blue Hill at Stone Barns.

To say that I was skeptical upon hearing this pronouncement was an understatement. For as long as I can remember, if you told someone that you were going to New Jersey to have dinner they would laugh at you. Of course there were a few exceptions like Park & Orchard in Rutherford which was excluded from ridicule because of their terrific wine list, or a trek to Atlantic City to eat at Chef Vola was more than acceptable. But fine dining? Sure there were a few BYOs that had opened over the past decade in some of the more upscale towns, but fine dining on the scale of a place like Stone Barns? That seemed to be impossible.

But the one true exception was always the Ryland Inn. It's closed now but a few people told me that Craig Shelton, a disciple of David Bouley, was one of the best chefs in the country. Whether it was true or not is something that I will never know as not only didn't I eat there during the restaurant's heyday, I could only find a handful of people who had actually been to the restaurant. Finally my friend Toby went, but as they say in the biz, the restaurant was finished by that time and he was less than impressed and he told me I didn't have to make the trek to Central Jersey to try it. It closed a year or so later.

But a good restaurant is like a good idea and it has a way of reinventing itself. Enter Steve Distler, a local businessman who was in the process of turning an old service station a half mile outside of the village of Princeton into a restaurant. Steve was talking to his local wine merchant and he mentioned that he was looking for a chef. The wine merchant happened to be friendly with Scott Anderson, the Chef de Cuisine from the Ryland Inn, and introductions were arranged and a partnership was eventually forged. Scott brought Ryland veterans Joe and Emilia Sparatta on board with him as his sous and general manager, and the rest, as they say, is history.

We ate in the kitchen. The front of the kitchen has been finished into a small dining area that holds two tables of four. It's a pleasant space with lots of light and it's in close proximity to the chefs so we were able to chat with Scott and Joe about everything from the food we were eating to other restaurants that we had recently been to. Speaking of

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the food we were eating, being located in New Jersey means that most of the ingredients come from inside the state, which to be honest, was a prospect that Mrs. P and I were both suspect of, until we tasted the food that is.

I started with a trio of amuse: A slice of Kindai tuna sushi flavored with Yuzu, ostrich carpaccio wrapped around a thin stalk of lettuce, and a cup of local ramps vichyssoise with potato and caraway. It was a lovely way to begin and it sort of served as a calling card for the rest of our meal. A soup of New Jersey asparagus soup with a soft poached egg and summer truffle was next. At first I tried to eat the elements separately, but Mrs. P had the brilliant idea to split the egg open and dump all of the ingredients into the plate which turned out to be the perfect thing to do. Terrific flavors and textures that made for the perfect taste of spring. The menu lists the next dish as, Laughing Bird Shrimp with avocado, pineapple, peanuts and baby lettuces as "Thai Shrimp Salad", but it didn't strike me as being Thai while eating it. It got better as I was eating it as I figured out that while the dish was plated in the deconstructed style of Michel Bras, the trick was to push all of the ingredients together and eat it like a salad. I even mashed the avocado balls into the other ingredients so the creaminess of avocado infected each forkful. Yumm.



When it comes to restaurants in the spring time, green is the color of my true love's hair and the next dish, sea scallops with split peas, ham and morels continued the spate of green dishes that were arriving at our table. Joe had been telling us about a purveyor who sources New Jersey scallops and monkfish and the specimens on my plate were so good that it might be worthwhile moving to the Garden state. Okay maybe just a weekend home. Meaty and dense, they were sitting atop a light hash of deeply flavored morels, pearl onions and thinly sliced broccoli stems in a split pea broth. My next dish, skate cut into pinwheels and served with spinach, guanciale, crosnes and ramps was good, but I thought that the dish Mrs. P was served, local monkfish, cooked sous vide for 18 minutes at 52 Celsius and topped with steelhead roe from Steve Stallard and a hot pepper sauce was the dish of the night. Not only was the fish amazingly tender, but the subtle inclusion of hot pepper in the dish was unique for this style of cuisine.



I had left the choice of our meal to the kitchen, but I asked to finish the meal with meat so I had the skirt steak with potato, alliums, spinach and "custard" which was good but on the plain side. But once again, Mrs. P hit the jackpot with the Kindai tuna, broccoli rabe, raisin, Marcona almond and cipollini onion. The tuna almost looked artificial as it was this strange pale pink color. And there was such a light sear on the outside that made it look like the type of plastic tuna they might have in the window of a Japanese restaurant. But the flavor! It was like eating chutoro that was lightly seared on the outside but which was dense and meaty on the inside. In fact it was so delectable that I

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asked Joe if we were eating fatty tuna and he responded by saying, "no, that's the loin. They're just amazingly marbled." For dessert they brought out an egg that was filled with a maple cream along with a slice of maple cured bacon atop a piece of French toast – followed by a chocolate cube based on a technique of Michael Laiskonis served with creamsicle ice cream, tangerine and Marcona Almond. Wine was a bottle of 1978 Robert Arnoux Vosne-Romanee Suchots.



In addition to the solid food, the space that Steve Distler built is really beautiful. In addition to the attractive main dining room and lovely kitchen space, there is a private dining room that is cantilevered over the kitchen, and you can also have dinner in the wine room. Anyway back to the food, talk about being surprised! In fact on the drive back to the Manhattan, Mrs. P couldn't stop talking about how much she enjoyed her meal, and because of the New Jersey location, how low her expectations were before we got there. But sometimes things work out for the better. Not only did Elements turn out to be one of the better new restaurants that we've been, with the potential to get even better, given the seasonality of the menu, and a location that is 52 miles outside of Manhattan, I can see us visiting 2-3 times a year.

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