

New dining spot 'elements' gets nod from Princeton VIPs

By Lauren Otis, Staff Writer

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All the elements were present. Or, put another way, all were present at elements.

Princeton's latest high-end dining venue, elements (spelled with a lowercase e) held its inaugural reception on Tuesday evening, drawing a lively crowd of area luminaries to sample food, drinks and experience the newly constructed dining space located at 163 Bayard Lane in the township in anticipation of the restaurant's opening on Saturday.

Township Committeewoman Vicky Bergman held a small cup of soup made with cardoon, a close cousin of the artichoke, in one hand and in the other a cocktail consisting of vodka and muddled herbs.

"It's very nice," Ms. Bergman said of the soup. And the cocktail? "It's different, it's drinkable, it's unusual," she said.

"I think it's fabulous, I think it's gorgeous décor," said township Mayor Phyllis Marchand as she stood in the restaurant's main dining room, decorated in teak, maple and quarry stone. Noting two steel I-beams spanning the ceiling and three large windows overlooking Bayard Lane (Route 206) where bay doors once stood when the structure was a garage, Mayor Marchand said "he really has done a beautiful job architecturally and the food tonight has been outstanding."

Members of Princeton's business, political, arts and university communities were all mingling at the reception, including Jeff Nathanson, executive director of the Arts Council of Princeton, Kristen Appelget, Princeton University's director of community and regional affairs, and Borough Councilman Kevin Wilkes.

The restaurant is the brainchild of financier Stephen Distler and chef Scott Anderson, both co-owners. Mr. Distler is a former managing director and treasurer at investment banking firm Warburg Pincus LLC and is currently chairman and CEO of The Bank of Princeton, the startup community bank whose headquarters building is nearing completion a block away from elements on Bayard Lane. Mr. Anderson is the former chef at the Ryland Inn in Whitehouse Station.

Mayor Marchand said she found the name elements to be an intriguing one, because of the many meanings of the word, and how so many of those meanings seemed to be embodied in the new restaurant.

"We thought long and hard about it," Mr. Distler said to Mayor Marchand, explaining how the restaurant got its name. "It has to do with the fact that everything in here is natural, the stone, the wood and it fits in with Scott's philosophy of cooking," he said.

"I call it interpretive American cuisine," Mr. Anderson said in the kitchen as he busily arranged plates of bite-size creations for the guests. He will marry local, sustainably-grown products with non-traditional ingredients, finding inspiration "from all over the world," Mr. Anderson said.

American cooking is the cooking of the world because so many people from foreign countries have settled here, so he intends to find inspiration far and wide, Mr. Anderson explained. "We are going to fine tune it forever," he said of what he foresees as an ongoing evolution in the menu at occasions.

"I'm psyched, our staff is probably one of the best kitchen staffs in New Jersey," said sous chef Joe Sparatta, as he worked next to Mr. Anderson in the open kitchen. Mr. Sparatta, along with his wife, Emilia, who is elements' manager, both came from the Ryland Inn as well.

Head bartender Mattias Hagglund said he intends to also emphasize fresh ingredients and to "keep things simple." He intends to



Head bartender Mattias Hagglund sets out glasses in the main dining room at elements, a new restaurant opening at 163 Bayard Lane in Princeton.

Staff photo by Mark Czajkowski

make his own tonic, bitters and ginger beer, Mr. Hagglund said. “We will concentrate on putting out classic cocktails in a high quality fashion,” he said. An extensive wine list is also available to patrons.

Addressing attendees briefly, Mr. Distler said: “Two years ago I decided I wanted to create something that would be in my estimation the finest restaurant in Princeton, which I thought would support such a thing, and I think I will wind up with the finest restaurant in New Jersey.”

The 80-seat elements — designed by architect Bob Steele — includes a private dining room for eight separated from the main dining area by large frosted glass panels, as well as two “chef’s tables,” located in the kitchen area, which can accommodate up to 10 guests. Upstairs is another area for private events and a wine room for tastings. The open kitchen looks directly out into the dining area.

Mr. Steele, principal architect with BOB (Beyond Ordinary Boundaries) Architecture PC in Richmond, Va., had come up for the opening. Asked what aspect of his design he found most pleasing now that construction is complete, “I think the totality of it,” he said. “Just the openness of the space is what I’m most pleased with,” Mr. Steele added.

Mr. Steele said he met Mr. Anderson six years ago and, as friends, they would talk about what space Mr. Anderson would want ideally when he finally opened his own restaurant, “and this is it.”

Mr. Anderson’s interest in an open kitchen where he could see diners, and interact with them, was a great aspect of the restaurant’s design, Mr. Steele said. “I do a lot of restaurants and he is the first chef who wants to experience all of us as we experience what he creates,” he said.

The ragged economy and upheaval on Wall Street did not intrude on elements’ gala opening, but was not far from the minds of attendees. More than one guest at the elements opening noted that while the restaurant appeared excellent, it might be a bit out of their price range given current economic times.

”There are elements beyond our control,” quipped one luminary.

”Clearly the timing is not ideal,” said Mr. Distler. “However, with the opening of Eno Terra and JL Ivy, and the upcoming Bobby Trigg restaurant at the Peacock Inn, we feel that we are jointly raising the bar on the dining options in Princeton,” he said. As Princeton becomes a “dining mecca” its restaurants will attract patrons from far afield and prosper even in difficult times, he said.

”The more the better, it’s good for all of us,” Mr. Distler said.

The restaurant elements is located at 163 Bayard Lane (Route 206) in Princeton Township. For information and reservations call 609-924-0078 or go online at www.elementsprinceton.com.

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