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Wednesday, Nov. 17, 2010

Dining: New K Town fares best on informal bistro fare

Dining Review | Brian Patterson



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Although a small pot of honest, fresh butter with the bread basket might seem like a minor detail, it's a vast improvement over the ubiquitous and soulless foil-wrapped butter chips. At K Town Bistro, a little rosette of freshly piped butter served with slices of crusty baguette coaxes the diner to a hungry place.



Anthony Castellano/The Gazette
Among K Town Bistro's dishes are scallops and timbale of salmon served with sautéed spinach, tomatoes and lobster sauce (left) and beef tomatoes served with zucchini soufflé, mashed potatoes, béarnaise and bordelaise (right). The dessert trio (rear) includes chocolate mousse, sliced bananas with light caramel coating and crème brûlée.

Open for one month, K Town is a welcome addition to the Kensington dining landscape. Owner Gonzalo Barba boasts 40 years of experience, including 20 as the Watergate Hotel's dining room captain. A courteous greeting at the door, fresh long stemmed roses and posh tableware that feels appropriate in a bistro wedged between Howard Avenue antique shops project a look and feel of Old World charm.

The menu succeeds when it sticks to more informal bistro cuisine. Soups, salads and sandwiches are tasteful yet simple and uncomplicated. The lobster is not stuffy or formal; its texture is coarse and dense rather than silky and smooth, and it's rich with the flavor of roasted lobster and vegetables with a light touch of sherry. Cream of mushroom happened to be the soup of the day, and it also is rustic rather than refined, coarse and rich with an earthy mushroom flavor. However, the slices of onion in the French onion soup are neither tender nor sweet, and the under-seasoned broth is dark and bitter, with too few croutons and too little cheese on top.

Appetizers include links of spicy lamb Mergeuz sausage that are properly cooked and served on a bed of thickly cut ratatouille that is thankfully not over-stewed. Instead, it is lightly cooked so the vegetables keep some of their natural texture and flavor. Crispy oysters consist of competently breaded and fried oysters served over a "mousse" of avocado, which basically is a fresh, yet mild guacamole, and drizzled with beads of strong saffron aioli and reduced balsamic vinegar. The crab cake, served atop a large bed of corn kernels sautéed with diced peppers, is more about breading and bits of cooked salmon than lumps of crab. It is ringed with a sauce that bears a striking resemblance to the lobster bisque. The variety of panini-style



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sandwiches that come with a bowl of soup on the Plain and Fancy combo are well-made and good to eat.

The most expensive lunch entrée, seared scallops with salmon mousse, is a letdown. Its four large firm scallops look well seared, but were overcooked, making them dense and chewy. The timbale of salmon mousse is a large mound of coarsely ground salmon that is dense rather than delicate, and tastes like it was reheated rather than made fresh to order. Its sauce also is reminiscent of the lobster bisque. The sautéed spinach is the highlight of this dish — warm, not overcooked and well-seasoned. Beef stroganoff is generous with the linguini, yet stingy with the beef and the sour cream sauce.

The meal ends on a happy note. A trio of confections represents the dessert menu well. Creme brulee is a good custard with a crunchy glaze of caramelize sugar on top, chocolate mousse is rich with bittersweet chocolate, and fresh slices of banana have an impossibly light caramel coating that is delicious with the accompanying custard sauces and fruit purees.

The wine list is eclectic with something from most wine-producing countries for most palettes and price points. Tap water is free, while sparkling water comes at a price. There is an unusual array fruit juices available, including pineapple, strawberry and mango.

It's a quirky space with promising prospects. The polite and attentive wait staff delivers something more professional and accommodating than mere casual service. White linen tablecloths are protected by stiff paper tops. Andean pan flutes render 1960s pop songs on the stereo. And while the less formal dishes are more successful, it's when K Town Bistro attempts to fly too high that the food falls flat.

K Town Bistro

3784 Howard Ave., Kensington 301-933-1211

Hours: Tues.-Sun. 11 a.m.-3 p.m., 5-11 p.m.

Style of cuisine: Continental

Lunch: Soups & appetizers \$6-\$10, sandwiches & entrees \$10-\$18

Dinner: Three course prix-fixe menu \$25; a la carte: appetizers \$7-\$10, entrees \$16-\$24

Carryout: Lunch \$4.65/lb., dinner/weekends \$6.25/lb.

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