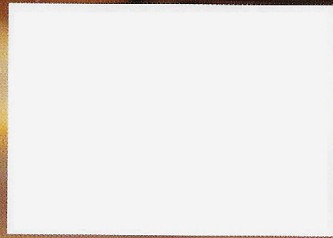
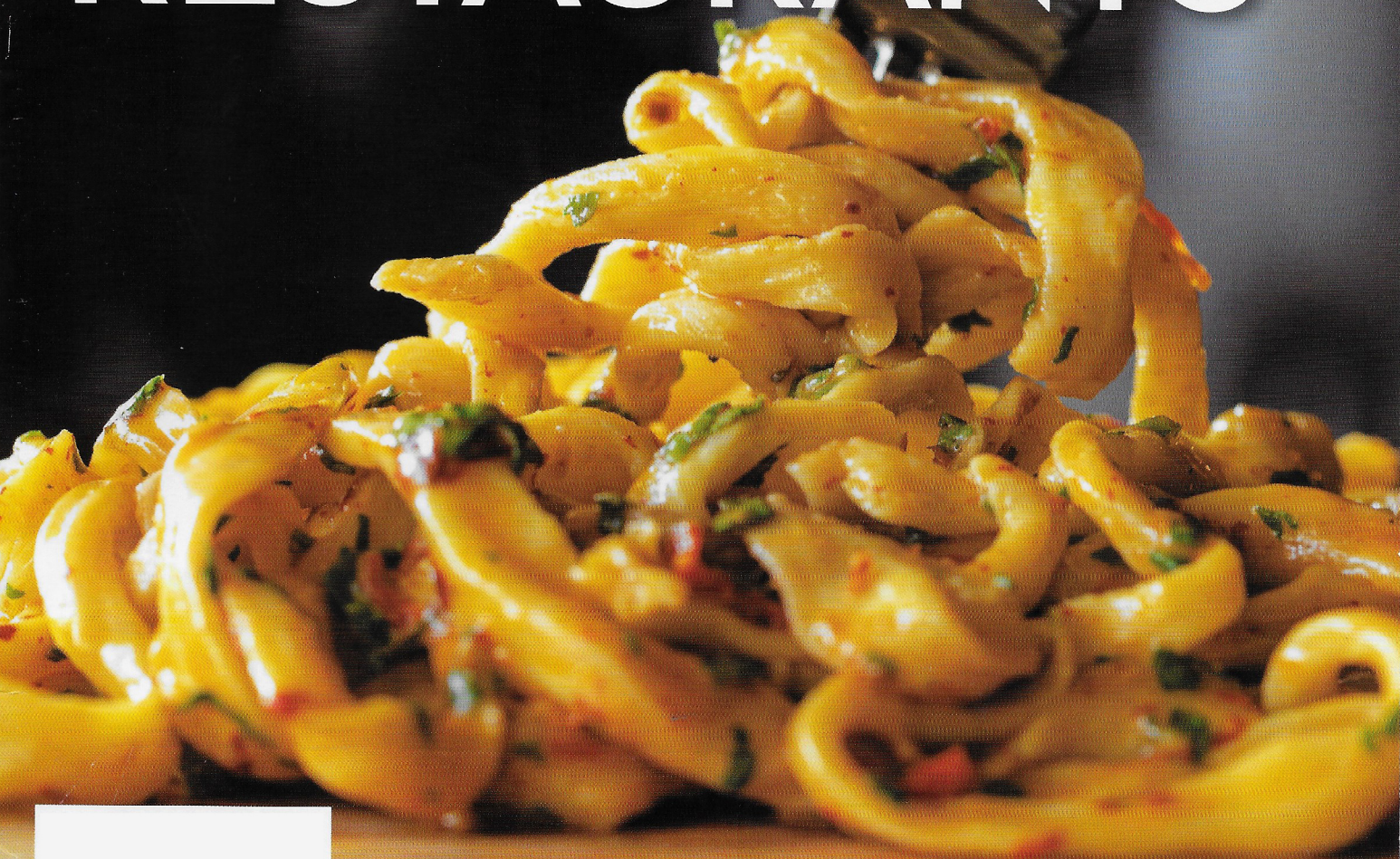


New Jersey

MONTHLY

30 BEST NEW RESTAURANTS



Mugnaia pasta, made from one continuous strand, at Il Nido in Marlboro.

30 BEST NEW RESTAURANTS

These rookie standouts bring variety and vivacity to a statewide scene that hits for power and average, even in the midst of winter.

The 30 were chosen by deputy editor/dining editor Eric Levin and New Jersey Monthly's food writers after visits to the most promising restaurants opened in 2019. The team: Michael Aharon, Marissa Rothkopf Bates, Jill P. Capuzzo, Josh Friedland, Sophia F. Gottfried, Jenn Hall, KT Harrison, John Holl, Lynn Martenstein, Rosie Saferstein, Fran Schumer and Shelby Vittek.

100 OCEAN

LONG BRANCH

Tucked inside the new Wave Resort in Pier Village, sleek 100 Ocean opens onto the bustling boardwalk. It operates year-round, but come summer, expect the restaurant and its outside tables to be packed solid with diners diving into decadent seafood toovers, shareables like fava-bean hummus and whipped eggplant dip, housemade pastas, and well-executed fish dishes such as steamed black sea bass and roasted branzino. A largely seafood restaurant might be the last place you'd order eggplant parmigiana, but 100 Ocean's is superb and big enough for two.—Shelby Vittek

110 Ocean Avenue; 732-795-6618; 100-ocean.com

ALLEGORY

MONTCLAIR

The western end of Montclair's main drag gets a needed boost from the long-awaited MC Hotel and its ground-floor New American restaurant, Allegory. Framed by window walls facing the

avenue, the dining room and bar are spacious and comfortable. There have been some knocks on the food and sometimes-disorganized service, but overall the savories, especially the small plates, are generous and pleasing. Take the elevator to the très-chic rooftop bar with indoor and outdoor seating.—Eric Levin

690 Bloomfield Avenue; 973-329-5600; allegorymc.com

ATLANTIC HOUSE

ATLANTIC HIGHLANDS

After a two-year renovation of the former Memphis Pig Out, Atlantic House opened just in time for Independence Day. Owners of the grand two-story space are Rich Crocker, a partner in Asbury Festhalle & Biergarten in Asbury Park, and his mother, sister and wife. Downstairs offers a more formal dining experience than the upstairs lounge, with sliding window panels that welcome a beachy breeze in season. In either space, enjoy signature cocktails along with chef Brendan Neville's twists on classics like coq au vin, fish and chips, and seared local scallops on parsnip-pear purée.—SV

67 1st Avenue; 848-300-2408; theatlantichouse.com



PHOTOGRAPH: JAMES WORRELL



BISTRO D'AZUR

SOUTH ORANGE

Even in the depths of winter, the vibe in this French and Mediterranean newcomer is as sunny as a beach day on its namesake Côte d'Azur. If you like butter and lobster, you will swoon over the lobster crêpe, which is up to its gunwales in both. Not everything is quite so *magnifique*, but better book well ahead if you want to dine on a weekend.

BYO (See review, p. 68)

—Fran Schumer

14 Academy Street; 973-327-9725; bistrodazur.com

A comforting saffron- and-fennel broth completes the allure of the Bistro d'Azur bouillabaisse.

Bistro d'Azur

• SOUTH ORANGE



FOOD French and Mediterranean

AMBIENCE Colorful and radiant

SERVICE Enthusiastic, if inexperienced

DRINKS BYO, plus wines by the bottle from Unionville Vineyards

PRICES Appetizers: \$14–\$22; entrées, \$27–\$39; dessert, \$10

OPEN Dinner, Tuesday–Sunday; brunch, Sunday

→ 14 Academy Street; 973-327-9725; bistrodazur.com

By Fran Schumer

Enter Bistro d'Azur in South Orange and you're immediately enveloped in what co-owner Mary Conway aptly calls "the vibe of an upscale beach club in the South of France." Conway's husband, Tom, an architect in Summit, has transformed the interior of the former Noodlefan. Now, under a sky-blue ceiling, Greek fisherman lamps hang above tables sufficiently spaced to allow intimacy, but also a view of everyone else, which gives the room its celebratory atmosphere. After opening last September, it quickly gained a devoted following.

To launch Bistro d'Azur, their first restaurant, the Conways teamed up with chef Richard Krug, whom Mary knew from her work as an event planner at Orange Lawn and Tennis Club in South Orange. Krug also seeks to transport you, and mostly succeeds. Two of his best appetizers are classically French. Pan-seared Hudson Valley foie gras is gratifying and velvety under crisp skin. Were there more of the buttery cauliflower purée beside it, I'd gobble it up with a spoon. The lobster crêpe feature a full third of the meat of a 1.5-pound lobster. If its rich, white sauce seems a bit unexciting, the butter in it is hard to resist.

More contemporary, the beet and goat cheese salad is lighter, yet equally seductive—the beets tender and sweet, the arugula so springy you would swear it was just picked. "I order my produce one day; two days later it's brought to me from the farm," says Krug. "It never sits in a warehouse."

Krug grew up in Old Bridge. At 20, he began prepping salads at a TGI Fridays. After graduating from the CIA in 1996, he cooked at Lorena's in Maplewood, Whispers in Spring Lake, and Orange

Lawn in South Orange until it was sold in 2018. Now 55, he has the know-how and confidence to try new things. In his bouillabaisse, the usual leftover white fish is forgone in favor of a thick and meaty halibut fillet. Mussels, plump and tender, are cradled in their shells—perfect for scooping up the saffron and fennel-scented broth.

An organic breast of chicken, served with wing joint attached, had golden juice and hearty flavor. Steak au poivre was tender and nicely marbled, though lacking the namesake pepperiness. Roasted lamb chops were perfectly cooked, juicy and pink, but they lacked the slightly gamey flavor that distinguishes lamb from other red meat.

There were other issues. On one visit, lobster crêpe was barely warm, a survivable flaw; but the same problem with butternut squash soup was nearly fatal. Was the tepidness a fluke? Perhaps. A half hour later, at the next table, a server ceremoniously poured the same soup from a tea pot, the soup issuing steam.

Shelled escargot did little to enhance Krug's revisionist paella, and the scallops that were its centerpiece were slightly overcooked. Fingerling potatoes, in every dish in which they appeared, were overcooked. So, too, was a fillet of salmon. After a dismal bite or two, it was barely touched. At the end of the meal, the server took it away without comment. Granted, I hadn't sought out anyone to complain. But a more attentive staff would have asked if we had found fault with the dish and possibly removed the \$32 charge from the bill.

Happily, the meal ended with a memorable up. The lemon meringue—not a pie, but a bowl layering sweet, sour, crumbly and smooth—was one of the best desserts I have eaten all year, or ever. Meringue is often just sugary air. This one, because it's cooked, has heft and the fresh morning flavor of rich, sweet cream. A runner-up was a dish of vanilla, cinnamon and coffee ice creams produced in a state-of-the-art Musso Lussino machine.

Bistro d'Azur, just two months old when I dined there, has clearly become a local favorite. Given the excellence to be found on the menu and the uplifting beauty of the space, I am certain that, in time, it will evolve into the reliably first-rate restaurant its owners intend it to be. 🍴