

Go Triad

There's No Finer Dining Than Marisol

By John Batchelor

From the beginning, I have considered chef-proprietor Stephen Schneider one of the most talented restaurants in our area. But in the early days, I thought he needed the services of a good editor, just as any precocious talent benefits from constructive reflection.

Through the years, his imagination has remained fertile, while his conception of what people enjoy (which is not always in harmony with what brilliant chefs create) has been refined. I think he is, figuratively speaking, at the top of his game now. As a matter of fact, during these meals, I thought he was at the top of everybody's game.

The name Marisol comes from a blend of sea and sunlight. The restaurant's motto, 'Live, Love, Eat' is reflected in every aspect of the experience. Seating in the main dining area creates a cafe' ambience. When full, however, noise is a problem, although not as much as in common in our area. A separate piano bar with leather sofa seating rounds out one of the most romantic and sophisticated looks in the Triad.

Just as you will have to do when you visit Marisol, let's deal with price at the outset. This is the most expensive restaurant in the Triad. But on balance, for what you get, I considered value reasonable. No matter what I visit, so plenty of people must be willing to pay these prices.

The wine list, for example, contains some expensive selections, but even at the lowest end, you can't choose a bad wine, and I would estimate that markups are lower than most lower-priced lists. I would add that there are upper-end items here that are seldom, if ever, available anywhere else. The wine list had to be recognized repeatedly by the Wine Spectator magazine.

One visit began with an amuse-bouche (gratis) of smoked clams, fresh cilantro and onions, surrounded by a passion fruit and blood orange vinaigrette. Another prelude was asparagus soup with shaved perigord truffles and smoke clams.

The printed menu lists first courses only. I often order calamari during reviews because it reveals so much about the kitchen's technique and attention to detail. Marisol's Flash Fried Calamari (\$12) turned out the most tender and flavorful of any I have tried, their taste sharpened by a salad of julienned cucumber, daikon radish, Granny Smith apple and fresh basil, flanked by a sambal (a Vietnamese pepper) aioli.

The main ingredient in Sauteed Foie Gras Club (\$25) virtually melted upon the bite, excluding rich duck liver flavor, enhanced by oven roasted Roma tomato and prosciutto, presented on toasted brioche. If there is a more richly rewarding preliminary experience in the Triad, I haven't found it.

The most startling starter was grilled caesar salad (\$12). A whole head of Romaine had been slightly charred, then combined with shaved parmigiano-reggiano cheese, dashed with and topped with flash fried oysters, sauced with a horse radish bearnaise aioli.

I always describe bread. I seldom compliment it. Marisol's whole wheat sourdough with black mission figs and walnuts, parmesan-onion focaccia and hard Italian rolls all deserve praise, as does the richly flavored butter the restaurant serves. I swear, you can smell the aroma of that butter from the table.

Servers recite entree descriptions orally. Most seafood cost \$35, a few \$38; meats are \$38. The servers are deeply knowledgeable about the food, and they are astute at making wine recommendations, as well. The staff here is remarkably stable; I see the same faces I saw years ago, and, to be candid, they know me, too.

Although a salad is not included, each entree is part of a complete conception that includes a composition of vegetable portions. On one visit, baby green beans, yellow squash, broccoli rabe, carrot, zucchini and tomatoes had been given a classic French treatment. The presentation was stacked over a mound of mashed sweet potatoes. On another, braised baby fennel bulb sweet potatoes, asparagus, carrots, organic kale and beet greens with applewood-smoked bacon and apple cider joined small cuts of yellow squash and zucchini in a colorful presentation that yielded a wonderful interplay of textures and flavors, all of which married well with the entree's main ingredient.

Red Drum \$35 was pan seared, then roasted, served with golden chanterelle mushrooms, Madras curry and goat cheese in white wine and chicken stock reduction. Chilled jumbo lump crabmeat perched on top. A nest of micro greens lightly covered Pan-Seared Tiger Paw Scallops (\$38), enhanced by a strained fried shallot balsamic glaze.

Corvina (\$35) a soft, white fleshed fish, was pan-seared then pan roasted . The fish bore just a hint of crust, perfectly cooked. Micro greens and seared prawns completed the composition, with flavors extended by a kaffir lime leaf and tomato white wine lobster stock reduction. Blackened Yellow Fin Tuna (\$35) arrived in a robust arrangement of shiitake mushrooms, sage and pabchetta, in a white wine chicken stock reduction with a touch of cream, served over crab hash. Monkfish (\$35) a firm fish, was lightly dusted with seasoned flour and slow roasted, then finished with Dijon mustard and basil butter.

Grilled Colorado Rack of Lamb (\$38) had been supplemented by dried French sausage and roasted garlic, in a red wine veal stock reduction seasoned with oregano. Stilton cheese added richness to the already deep flavor of a grilled Angus Bone-in Beef Tenderloin (\$38), resting in port wine veal stock reduction.

Desserts cost \$10. My party tried a Pineapple-Ginger Clafouti-kind of an elegant pancake-with coca-hazelnut ice cream, as well as traditional Creme Brulee and Chocolate Pot de Creme with orange Madeleine cookies and candied pecans. Although my friends were characteristically cooperative in sharing, I noted that everyone tended to harbor as many bites as possible.

Or consider an alternative, a cheese course (\$5/serving) which I have grown to prefer over sweets. I selected Big Wood Blue from Shepard's Way Farm in Minnesota and garrotxa from the Catalonia region of Spain. These were served with toast of sourdough bread, plus walnut and plum butter.

Marisol's combination of restaurant and piano bar represents the most complete fine dining experience in the Triad. To the artist's creativity, the restaurant's staff has now learned how to maintain accessibility, that magic ingredient.

Steve schneider trained at Johnson and Wales. He is assisted in the kitchen by Robin Gwynn a GTCC culinary graduate, and Alfio Gulisano, who trained in Argentina. Scott Boyd is lead waiter on the floor.

John Batchelor is a freelance contributor who has been reviewing restaurant for more than 20 years.

Winston Salem Journal

Marisol Conjures Up Some Fabulous Food, True Magic!

by Candice Jones

Greensboro-Marisol: The name conjures images of sea and sun; of the south of France, perhaps. Marisol the restaurant may not be sun-washed or sea-drenched, but it comes pretty close to serving the best food around these parts. Some of the food is French-in-influence, but the cuisine of Chef Stephen Schneider traverses continents, and the offerings at his restaurant are deliciously impossible to pigeonhole.

This restaurant cuts no corners on preparation: Sauces-of-ten made with deep stock reductions are top notch and menu selections are superb. Before you even look at the menu though, you're presented with a little amuse-bouche or 'mouth amusement'. Recently, it was a tiny calamari salad with a garlicky lemon-wasabi vinaigrette, a little burst of flavor to set the taste buds tingling.

The printed menu included these recent appetizers: carpaccio of beef with lemon-truffle vinaigrette, flash-fried calamari with lemon grass slaw, or Russian sevruga caviar.

Among the entrees were Asian-influence pan roasted salmon with a sweet soy glazed, lemon-wasabi vinaigrette and cucumber-basil salad; pan-roasted halibut with smoked morels and seared prawns in a red-wine, veal-stock reduction; and a grilled veal chop with shiitake mushrooms in a Madeira and thyme broth.

These were just a few of the choices and don't even include the breathtaking selection of 16 evening specials that included appetizers, soups and entrees. (The specials are recited, from memory, don't even an utterly competent wait staff: It's an impressive performance, but not an easy task for diners who want to relax and not have to memorize them themselves.)

And despite the attractive printed seasonal menu, the specials are where many of the most exciting choices lie. Recently, an evening's soup was a chicken stock floating with wonton-wrapped potatoes and truffles, garnished with foie gras. Special appetizers include grilled asparagus with a charred, nearly meaty flavor served with a little mound of wild mushrooms in a tart and sweet balsamic-vinegar sauce.

Surely the best appetizer I've had in months was the grilled homemade chicken sausage-given texture and flavor by spinach and mango-with a dark duck broth zinged with lemon grass all topped by fresh black truffles shaved at the table. This is seriously good food.

There were flash-fried veal sweetbreads served on greens with prosciutto and a caramelized balsamic vinaigrette, but we went for a specially recommended South African lobster tail served with a creamy morel Maderia sauce, finished with truffle oil. The rich sauce was magnificent, but the lobster itself was disappointingly short on flavor.

The evening's entrees were so tempting that we ordered straight from the recited list, and we were delighted. Sturgeon is sometimes better-known for its roe than for its flesh, which is delicious. Here, the high fat yet delicate fish was topped with fresh crabmeat and a jalapeno tarragon broth.

A four-chop rack of lamb with a roasted-garlic rosemary broth was superb, and a 6 ounce New York strip steak au poivre was short on peppercorns but full of deep grilled flavor. All our entrees were served with lovely little bundles of vegetable: Buttery sugar snaps, tiny haricot verts, sweet cubes of beets and diced squash.

Located in a tiny shopping center, Marisol's prosaic exterior opens to reveal a very attractive dining room with stucco fireplaces and the feel of somewhat south -Southwest United States-the South of France'

Crisp white tablecloths, tiny oil lamps soft jazz in the background and the soft bubble from a copper fountain work together to make the small, understated dining room sleek and warm. Little clay dishes of salt sit on the table next to soft triangles of butter, just right for spreading on delicious focaccia topped with rosemary and crusty shards of onion.

As the evening proceeds and the restaurant fills up, a feeling of warmth and contentment moves in, and not just from the bottle of wine you might be drinking. (We enjoyed a bottle of Sancerre, a bone dry \$27 white wine from a list high on quality, high on prices, but surprisingly low on French wines.)

Part of the comfort comes from the friendly, very professional staff, dressed in crisp white colorless shirts and black pants; part from the lovely surroundings; and part from the earnest and hard-working chef and staff in the semi-open kitchen

Ah, but the food, back to the food. Dessert (\$8) are terrific. Lemon pound cake reaches its apotheosis here, warm and toasty, with a crusty edge spooned with dice pineapple, raspberries and a big scoop of vanilla ice cream. Raspberry sorbet is bracing and fresh, served with an assortment of homemade cookie. A liquid-center chocolate cake is decadent, and if the creme brulee needed more depth of flavor, it was still very, very easy to spoon down.

If these prices intimidate you, you might consider lunch, with a nice variety of sandwiches and salads under \$10, and a few light entrees. Make no mistakes: Marisol is a superb restaurant with a obviously committed chef and staff, high quality ingredients and plenty of know-how. But if you're not a person of means, you'll need to have cracked open the piggy bank.

The Business Journal

Restaurant Review “Marisol Gets High Marks in Every Category”

From the moment you enter Marisol, it's clear you're in a temple of haute cuisine. Instead of a menu and a glass water, as soon as you sit down you're presented with an extensive hardback-bound wine list and the news that an 'amuse-bouche' (French for 'mouth treat') is on the way.

Your friendly waiter promptly presents you with a solitary dressed with a cherry vinaigrette, sitting in the middle of a huge plate, dusted with a flurry of fresh parsley flakes. I was, in fact amused, and so was my palate. It's only after you've slurped that down, lathered the herb-crust focaccia with sweet butter and ordered wine (if you choose to and it's pretty hard to resist) that the menus come.

And what a menu. For starters: crab cakes, carpaccio, lobster tails, caviar, escargot, calamari and asparagus. Then you can move on to the salad course, a half-dozen preparation most as elaborate and innovative as the silver-queen corn and tomato salad I had (\$10). The sweet corn, barley balanced, was balanced against tart pear tomatoes to which the chef added pungent arugula and chunks of blue cheese—a dazzling combination of fresh, seasonal ingredients.

In the entree department, choose from salmon, red snapper, duck, veal chops, sea bass, steaks, tuna, pork tenderloin and lamb, and of course, beef, among others, all floating elaborate sauces prepared from multiple, and often, exotic ingredients.

I, for instance, enjoyed an enormous serving of grilled halibut (35) flanked by a gargantuan prawn, all topped with a sauce of sun dried tomatoes, bacon and balsamic vinegar. Again, a zesty combination of tangy, smoky and sweet notes, anchored by a terrific piece of seafood.

That's just the menu. As you're absorbing the dizzying array of choice, your server tells you there are 16 specials—eight entrees, four salads and four appetizers. From this list, my guest ordered rabbit (\$35), which had been dusted with bread crumbs and lightly pan fried before being finished off to crunchy perfection in the oven, complemented with a Marsala/cherry reduction sauce. Exquisite.

That's the food. Well, almost. We also split a delicious white asparagus appetizer (\$18), dressed with mustard-and-rice-wine vinaigrette. A soup of crab and lobster (\$10), accented with pesto, was the only dish of the evening that proved disappointing. The basil, either dried or overcooked, rendered what could have been an excellent stock somewhat bitter.

Did I mention that the place was packed? And that I had to call at least five nights before I could get a table? And that the eight executives next to us came from Winston-Salem? Do I think Marisol is doing so well because it's Greensboro's latest, greatest temple of haute cuisine?

No. Granted, Marisol is buzzing because it's novel and someone's doing a very good job in the kitchen. But more importantly, in front of the open kitchen, the wait staff is not just personable but attentive and, above all else, professional.

It's well-spaced tables, excellent service coupled with superb food makes Marisol perfect for wining and dining client. Plus, the setting itself has a distinct California accent that says: Here's where cosmopolitan types congregate to kick back and enjoy the good life. So what if it costs an arm and a leg.

With its great location in a fast-growing and upscale part of the Triad, you've got a winning combination. Considering it's fine wine list and sophisticated cuisine, you almost expect to see vineyard outside the windows—instead of Mercedes and BMWs.

Taste of the triad is written every other week by a triad-based critic and serious eater who, in order to avoid special treatment, prefers to write anonymously. Send comments or suggestions to TasteoftheTriad@goplay.com.

Taste of the Triad Marisol

Address: 5834 High Point Road, Greensboro 27407

Phone: (336) 852-3303

Distance: About 10 miles from downtown High Point, 25 miles from downtown Winston-Salem

Appetizers: \$10-\$45

Entrees: \$26-\$45

Reservations: Recommended

Winston-Salem Journal

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Wonderful Indulgence Resides at Marisol

By Laura Giovanelli | Journal Reporter

A genteel couple of regulars ease in, the woman swathed in a scarlet shawl. They inquire about one server's new glasses. When she leaves, they drop their voices as they worry over someone's illness.

"Hendrick's?" a waiter asks before they sit down at their table, and he's off to the bar, hunting down a gin martini. Later, they will end dinner with a dish laden with every flavor of ice cream and sorbet the kitchen is offering that night -- why have to choose between blackberry creme fraiche and strawberry-basil? -- and they leave with a loaf of the house fig-walnut sourdough.

At Marisol, this isn't mere polished service. It is magic, these waiters' memories. They remember what you drank and they're not far off on what you ate. And they recite all of the specials, including every entree -- there are few printed menus. I love this, and I hate it. It's an exhibition, really, this nightly poem: There is lamb paired with a currant and balsamic gastrique, scallops with a hot-mustard glaze; there's fettuccine with morels, and there are oysters, baked or on the half shell with a mignonette sauce. There are sprinklings of cilantro, lashings of Pernod, curry, citrus and soy.

"...with avocado," one waiter said, coming to the end of his chant. He paused. Was that a whiff of embarrassment? "No, wait, that was last night."

The wrinkle comes when it's time to order. How can we remember all of that, too? Is a printed menu a sign of weakness? It certainly means we can't easily learn the prices.

Stephen Schneider is Marisol's head chef and owner. He also owned Rim, a fun tapas-and-wine bar on Elm Street in Greensboro that closed in 2009.

Marisol -- which has been open since 1997 -- is a different restaurant in so many ways. Wedged at the end of a small, suburban shopping center northeast of Jamestown, Marisol speaks a pre-Great Recession language, an unapologetic syntax of truffles and saffron, lobster and oysters. There's a hair salon appropriately named Dolce Vita nearby. Maybe the verbal menu is a pre-recession holdover, too.

There is an air of expense accounts about Marisol, tables of businessy-looking types alongside couples who pull up in Mercedes sedans. One night, a table of men passed around a decanter, guffawing as they swirled red wine into submission.

The dining rooms are open to the kitchen, stuccoed and painted warm colors that conjure the Southwest. One corner is devoted to a monster of a wooden counter, worn with a friendly patina from slicing bread. Slices of softened butter and small dishes of salt sit on tables.

That fettuccine with morels was a special one evening, served the Italian way, as a prelude to an entree but not replacing it, but I would have happily eaten it for dinner. It was pliant and yielding, with soft, toothsome bites of abalone mushrooms and morels nestled among the noodles and a shaving of white truffles on top. Gnocchi is also bedecked with truffles, and lump crab meat, for good measure, and comes with a cloud of good smells wafting above it. Fried sage leaves quiver on top. There is the heady perfume of brown butter. It is heaven to lean over that bowl.

There's a noticeable dedication to seasonality -- one reason perhaps not to print the menu out each evening -- and a strong Asian bent to the menu. A couple of soft-shell crabs, deftly fried and lacquered with chili, citrus and soy melded the two well, by bites briny, crispy and sweet. Amuse bouche -- one night a lamb meatball, another night a bite of sausage -- come bathed in curry sauce.

The lamb chops, their delicate white bones pristinely Frenched, were more traditional in that balsamic gastrique, but delicious.

The kitchen's creativity peters out when they get to the sides, an often incongruous mix of vegetables -- asparagus, sweet potato and red cabbage. It's sort of an uninspired one-size-fits-all approach.

I felt the same about a tuna carpaccio appetizer with olive vinaigrette. It came with long Parmesan crisps, snappy and salty, but the fish was mushy and the dish felt like something the kitchen was obligated to have on the menu, not something it wanted to.

Ah, dessert.

There are the ice creams -- salted caramel is a standout, as is coffee -- and a custardy coconut milk cake redolent of tres leches cake, but better.

There is a lot of molten chocolate cake in this world. A lackluster economy and real-estate bubbles can't take that away from us. Much of it is ho-hum, though. Marisol's isn't. It's served in a large ramekin, with shards of chocolate on top and a lava-hot pool inside.

Then it's time to go back into the cold, cruel world of downsizing and short-selling.

We may lose our jobs tomorrow, but we'll always have Marisol.

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