

To be Young and French

The latest dish on Sarasota dining

Marsha Fottler

Few things are perfect, but Maison Blanche, a new French restaurant within the Four Winds Beach Resort on Longboat Key, comes pretty close.

The restaurant is the work of Pascal Feraud, 28, and Moroccan-born Jose Martinez, 38, both fresh from a restaurant of the same name at the top of the Theatre des Champs-Élysées, Paris.

Wanderlust struck, and two years ago, Martinez sold the Paris restaurant and headed to Sarasota with wife Victoria, who works the front of the house. Feraud soon followed, and the friends asked their French architect to help them create a sophisticated modern design for the new restaurant. In smart black and white, the interiors are furnished with sleek furniture and accessories.

The silverware includes knives shaped like letter openers, and even the salt and pepper shakers are striking. If Feraud and Martinez would open a gift shop in the Four Winds and sell some of the things they set their tables with or furnish the restrooms with, they'd have a second winning enterprise in Sarasota.

But the best thing about this restaurant is the imaginative food, from the homemade bread to the intensely flavored ice cream swirled in their kitchen. The owners' take on classical French cuisine is to lighten up and use fresh (local, when possible) seafood and meats. No cassoulets, no French onion soup, no sweetbreads.

Instead you can enjoy a lovely gazpacho and one of the finest slow-broiled sea bass preparations you're likely to encounter anywhere. It's served with garlic spinach and a condiment sauce that includes capers. (\$28). The grouper, a specialty of the house, is simply cooked but paired with a cider-braised apple and porcini mushroom risotto. (\$31).

Lamb shank, another house specialty, is served in its own juices, while the roasted noisettes of lamb come in a madras curry.

The restaurant's small, well-trained waitstaff glides through the dining room in perfect rhythm with the kitchen. Getting the timing right for a degustation menu is tricky, but this crew knows exactly how it is done.

Silverware is replaced between courses, water glasses refilled, fresh bread appears-everything is accomplished with such skill that you don't realize how well you've been treated until the meal is over. Victoria Martinez seats the guests and comes around to say hello during the meal.

Many Europeans and Americans who have eaten at the Paris Maison Blanche restaurant have already discovered the Longboat Key dining room and are making it a regular reason to dine out.

All in all, Maison Blanche is off to a brilliant beginning. Now, where can we buy the silverware?

Maison Blanche

Four Winds Beach Resort

2605 Gulf of Mexico Drive, Longboat Key

383-8088

Non-smoking

Reservations suggested

Dinner: Monday-Thursday and Sunday, 5:30-9:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 10:30 p.m.

Major credit cards

Easy parking