

Tourism event trumpets county's blossoming dining scene

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(Enlarge) Line cook Ben Rosen of Laurel puts finishing touches on some orders at Bistro Blanc, one of 26 eateries participating in Howard County Restaurant Weeks. (Staff photo by Drew Anthony Smith)



Bistro Blanc has a bit of a speakeasy feel to it. If you aren't looking for this little gem in Glenelg, you'll miss it.

The restaurant sits at one end of a stone-facade strip center on Ten Oaks Road near the intersection with Triadelphia Road. With its understated signage, it stands a better chance of attracting traffic with its outdoor seating, which was decidedly not in use on the recent frigid day I stopped in for lunch.

A narrow front foyer funnels you toward a hostess station, but that Tuesday afternoon it was unstaffed. Maybe a slotted window would slide open and a bouncer would ask for the password?

But no, I ventured inside and found something much better than bathtub gin.

Howard County Tourism and the 26 participating establishments hope you'll embark on such adventures of discovery through the end of the month during Howard County Winter Restaurant Weeks, which began Monday.

Through Jan. 31, these local restaurants -- most of them independent (not chain) places -- will offer special prix fixe meals for anywhere from \$10.10 to \$40.10 (on account of it's 2010, get it?). This go-round for the twice-a-year Restaurant Weeks event, the emphasis is on international fare.

And the places around here are pretty eclectic. You can find Thai food, lots of Indian places, French of course, Italian and all sorts of Latin flavors.

But whatever the cuisine, chefs are also quick to note their use where possible of local ingredients, none more than Bistro Blanc's Marc Dixon.

A graduate of the New England Culinary Institute in Montpelier, Vt., Dixon has done chef stints at Columbia's Iron Bridge Wine Co. and Cafe de Paris. The Oberlin Park, Kan., native grew up in a farming family, and brings that experience as well as his culinary know-how to county school kids with "farm-to-table" field trips. Using pizza as his example, Dixon gives them new appreciation for what goes into what people eat every day.

When Bistro Blanc opened in July 2008, Dixon's goal was to bring fine dining to the west county, "but on a smaller scale and less foo foo." He emphasizes simple presentation and fresh ingredients.

"You want the green beans to pop right, for the carrots to have the right amount of sweetness."

And whenever practical, he wants that produce to come from nearby. "I wish I had more time to scour the area" for more local ingredients, he says he does get a fair amount of squashes and greens from Howard County farms, and regularly gets beef and pork from Woodcamp Farms in Mount Airy.

He says he also keeps an eye toward sustainability, with seafood choices including Arctic char and wild rockfish (which doesn't all come from the Chesapeake, Dixon notes).

For Restaurant Weeks, Dixon and his partner, Raj Kathuria, plan to throw the spotlight on some of the bistro's tried and true favorites, particularly dishes that got glowing reviews from The Washington Post and Baltimore Sun. One of them drew initial skepticism from Dixon's colleagues but ultimately turned out to be Bistro Blanc's menu star: the Pig and Fig.

"They laughed at me," Dixon recalls, sounding a little like a mad scientist. But his creation, a citrus-braised pork shoulder with fig, toasted brioche and vanilla muscato froth, drew raves from customers, even to the point where one commuter had standing orders from his wife to pick up a to-go order every week.

Bistro Blanc even has something of a Frankenstein gadget in the house, which Kathuria calls the restaurant's "toy." ***The Enomatic is an automated self-serve wine bar that allows patrons to buy a glass, half glass or just a taste with a credit card.*** Theirs was the first such machine in Maryland, Kathuria says. It allows a customer to test-drive that expensive vintage before committing to taking a bottle home with him (Bistro Blanc has an on-and-off-sale liquor license).

Like the mad doctor's castle, Bistro Blanc, is off the beaten track for most villagers, but that's part of the fun, Dixon says. "It's kind of an adventure, finding us in a sort of nondescript strip mall."

That's the kind of discovery Restaurant Weeks is supposed to be about.