

DECEMBER 2007

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DINING

I N • S T Y L E



Gracie's 21st Century Café & Catering

Owner/chef:
Gracie Skiadas

1534 Manatawny Road
Pine Forge, PA

610-323-4004

gracies21stcentury.com

Dinner:

Wednesday-Saturday
5:30 to 10:30 p.m.

Private parties,
including lunch
Cooking classes
Off-site catering

Lise Monty

When we turned off the country road in southern Berks County into the parking lot at Gracie's, I was relieved to see the pink flamingo perched in the garden. It signaled that the high-spirited attitude we remembered from our previous visit to this many-splendored restaurant, now in its 19th year, was alive and well.

Everything here is delicious, from the bright splash of neon art in one of the windows of the historic property, built in 1710 as part of the local iron forge business, to the elegant table settings in the four dining rooms, and non-stop feast of eclectic art works, memorabilia and architectural details. It's a hip yet homey restaurant, pleasantly offbeat yet totally civilized. All previous adjectives also apply to the splendid cuisine.



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Best Steak & Seafood
County Lines Magazine 2006, 2007

Chef Gracie's sophisticated, ever-evolving repertoire includes Asian fusion, Jamaican sizzle, Mediterranean vegetarian, and Greek-, Tuscan- and Swiss-influenced creations. They reflect her eclectic flower-child sensibilities—consider “Old Hippy” Carrot Cake!—and her save-the-earth tendencies. Under the menu's “Wild Seasonal Fishes & Organics,” she writes: “We have turned away from farm-raised fishes” and serve only “consciously monitored, wild-catch fishes that vary by their seasonal availability.”

The charms of the star-shaped pats of butter and the attractive ceramic pot cradling a roasted globe of garlic set the tone for the artistic presentations to come. Gracie's signature soup, *Jamaican Curried Crab Bisque* (\$12.50), came in a handsome, rustic “block bowl,” conventionally round on top but with a square bottom. This and other pottery serving pieces come from raku artist Michael Jones of Ohio. All three of us cheered the superb bisque, once mentioned in *Gourmet Magazine*. Chunks of sweet jumbo lump crab luxuriated in a creamy blend of coconut milk with scotch bonnet peppers adding a little heat and fresh lime juice a bit of tartness. To quote *Gourmet*, it promises to “bring you fond memories of those sweet-hot Caribbean nights.” Whew!

The amusingly named *Anjou Pears Salad Sings the Bleus* (\$15.50) was seriously good, a classic made-in-heaven pairing of fruit and cheese. The tangy gorgonzola bleu vinaigrette romanced the sliced red Anjou pears fanned out over organic red leaf lettuce and finished with pan-roasted walnuts and pomegranate molasses. The appealing composition was prettily framed by the china plate's marbled rim. We sat up and took notice when the *Thai Grilled Shrimp* (\$14.50) arrived with its three jumbo specimens speared high on tall skewers that rose dramatically from a small bamboo steamer filled with white taro noodles, Thai greens, slivered sugar snap peas and pea greens. The shrimp

Chef Salvatore D'Aprano of

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did not deliver the intensity of flavor we expected, but we crave hot!

Other appetizer options included the "Smokin' Sampler" with Norwegian smoked salmon, Duck Trap Farms Trout Fillet and Peppered Mackerel; Jumbo Shrimp Santorini over a Greek-inspired sauce of tomato, garlic and dill with feta and angel hair pasta; Lollipop Lamb Chops that are charcoal-grilled and served in a pool of marinara; and a raw bar oyster selection, which was Saddle Rock when we visited.

The deeply flavorful *Tuscany Lamb Shanks* (\$28.50) were melt-in-your-mouth tender and imbued with the joys of roasted garlic. Homemade gnocchi, as featherweight as promised, plus heirloom tomatoes, leeks, onions, root vegetables and various herbs played their supporting roles well. *Scallops "Bennie"* (\$31.50) took its inspiration from eggs Benedict. The jumbo day-boat scallops, perfectly sautéed, sat on puff-pastry "muffins," graced by sliced parmesan, prosciutto and wilted spinach, drizzled with béarnaise sauce and accompanied by steamed asparagus and grilled roasted fingerling potatoes. A light citrus sauce brought out the sweetness of the *Pan-Sautéed John Dory* (\$28.50) fillets cooked in lemon-thyme butter. With grilled Belgian endive and a tasty mash of parsnips and yams, it was another winning entrée.

We toasted our Australian wine choice from Gracie's multi-national list, sprinkled with a variety of trendy labels. The *Layer Cake Shiraz* (\$41), a 2005 winner from Barossa Valley, known for its much pricier wines, was lush yet light with a clean finish.

Other entrée options included the restaurant's ever-popular Asian-fusion Crispy Duck. Customers complain if it's not on the menu, said Gracie. The twice-cooked breast, painted with a Thai glaze, is served on a stir fry of vegetables seasoned with Thai chilies, soy and fresh ginger. Also, seared Yellow Fin Tuna with a stir fry of Asian vegetables and Canton noodles; Filet Mignon with béarnaise and pomme frites; and pan-seared Chicken Ascona,

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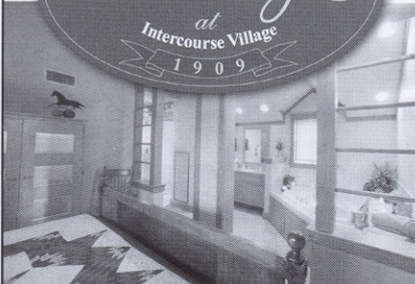
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prepared with plum tomatoes and fresh basil.

The dessert menu made us dizzy with its many sweet possibilities, from Montserrat Coconut Tart with key lime mousse that “tastes as sweet as a piece of your heart,” Gracie promises on the menu; White Chocolate Cheesecake drizzled with raspberry reduction; Wild Plums Alaska with plum wine in meringue; and “Orgasmic” Chocolate loaf with ripe berries in a pool of crème anglaise.

We shared the *Chocolate Fondue* (\$12.50), designed for two but more than enough for the three of us. We smacked our lips and purred happily as we dunked ripe strawberries and raspberries, chunks of kiwi and mango and cubes of dense chocolate brownies in the four-star melted chocolate seasoned with cinnamon, laced with cognac and kept warm and gooey over a small flame.

Our excellent young server easily combined a winning personality with professionalism, a perfect fit for Gracie’s model.

I couldn’t leave without another look around to check out the sights that make this restaurant unique. In the smallest dining room, Gracie honors her great-grandmother, “native to this community,” with artifacts like a medicine wheel that represents American Indian spirituality, and, over the fireplace, a print by R.C. Gorman, a renowned Native American painter and printmaker.

The room with the curved white walls and round-edged fireplace salutes sunny Greece and Gracie’s roots. Be sure to check out her collection of vividly colored Jamaican art and the playful jazz figures on top of the piano. They’ll make you smile. So will the women’s restroom, which is pure drama in black and white with modern-art touches and candles, plus the famous photo of Einstein sticking out his tongue and another of Picasso.

The “leave ‘em laughing” gesture arrived with the check, presented in a fancy, colorful, bejeweled box. ♦