

Inside Jersey



*Our Exclusive List
of Jersey's Best*

**2,219 TOP
DOCTORS**

Compiled by Castle Connolly Medical Ltd.

a higher level of sophistication, confidence and refinement.

Many ATH signatures remain on the menu, including the popular mussel pots, the Parker House rolls, the cheese boards and the local oysters. Yet the cuisine no longer tilts new American. A Toute Heure now leans decidedly European, with classic

served with a classic French demi-glace, atop a truly seductive trio of mushrooms. The gamy lamb, the earthy mushrooms — this dish will become a food memory.

Duck breast (\$36) is equally velvety and rich. This preparation, again, is brought to you thanks to French culinary techniques. (Gomes worked



French sauces, as well as influences from Italy and Portugal. And local fare may be superseded by food that is superior, such as the lamb, which comes from the California-based Niman Ranch. Their meat, says Gomes, is without peer.

Indeed, the lamb saddle is an exceptional — and generous — dish. Tender and rich, this is like a lamb chop without the actual chop, but also far more elegant. The lamb is seared and then slowly cooked, and, like a duck breast, arrives on the plate with that glorious layer of fat intact. The fat, whether you consume it or not, elevates the flavor of the meat, preserves the tenderness. The lamb is

previously at Chez Catherine in Westfield and Le Rendez-Vous Bistro in Kenilworth.) Modern chefs like to dismiss French techniques — too fussy, they say, and too much work. Say what you will, nothing compares.

As for seafood, Gomes insists on a delicate touch; fish is easily ruined by the simple act of pressing on it to encourage a quicker sear. “Don’t force it,” says Gomes. The sea bass, a catch of the day, was meaty yet sweet, a simple

From left: Alexandre Gomes, executive chef of A Toute Heure; Niman Ranch lamb saddle with fingerling potatoes, a trio of mushrooms, rosemary demi-glace sauce and salad of arugula and mustard greens; dayboat scallops with spring carrot puree, tri-color baby carrots and asparagus, thyme butter sauce and smoked paprika.



TERRIFIC TOMATO INDEX : EXTRAORDINARY ●●●●● EXCELLENT ●●●● GOOD ●●● FAIR ●●

ON THE SIDE

Rahway Taste

rahwaytaste.com

“I am the queen of oxtails.” This is not an everyday boast. But amid the ever-growing queue for Antilles at the Rahway Taste of Spring event earlier this year, oxtails were most definitely the topic of conversation. Chef Aliessa Howell’s



oxtail game was clearly on, and her skills, communicated like so much electricity through the crowd at the recreation center, encouraged a certain level of competitiveness among those who were waiting.

Howell is the chef at Antilles, which officially opened in May on Cherry Street in Rahway. The oxtails, infused with Caribbean spices, end on a sweet note. Warning: They are alarmingly addictive.

The Antilles menu, with its Caribbean and Southern influences reflects the childhood energy of owner Leon Gill, whose father is from Saint Lucia and whose New Jersey mother has ancestors from Georgia. Gill says it was easy to decide which family favorites would grace the menu; the hard part was nailing down the specifics for each recipe. All the cousins simply

cooked from memory.

The Antilles menu includes cod fritters and jerk chicken wings, also mac and cheese, sweet potato fries and plantains. Antilles is a tiny restaurant, just 22 seats, although takeout is also available.

Meanwhile, additional buzz (and more lines) at this year’s Rahway Taste event centered around the Railside Cafe in Fanwood. The restaurant was one of the event winners, and its popular pulled pork sandwich took home honors for the second consecutive year.

The trick to the pulled pork, says general manager Paul O’Loughlin, is root beer:



extravagance.

For appetizers, the Iberian octopus (\$18) — surprisingly tender, lovingly charred — should be required dining. You'll appreciate that Gomes did not remove the tentacles, which add texture and flavor. Gin-cured salmon (\$18) is just outrageous, a whimsy of a dish featuring delicate ribbons of salmon that were the perfect texture, such a feat with salmon, which is temperamental for so many reasons.

The ATH mussel pot, with chorizo in a saffron cream sauce, (\$13, half; \$30, full with frites), remains a decadent option; the mussels were the fattest mussels ever, prompting a discussion with the waiter about the horse mussels of Scotland, the largest mussel group. (Proving, yes, the wait staff is not only knowledgeable but curious about food.)

Tuna tartare (\$17) featured exceptionally fresh seafood and was pretty on the plate; its Thai chili sauce added spark and heat, but it was also excessive and therefore held a slightly tyrannical reign over the perfect tuna. Skip the Mexican street corn (\$15); it lacked the energy of the season and seemed forced.

Desserts remain important at A Toute Heure, although the options are more

classic than before (the previous menu often featured chocolate chip cookies and fun varieties of seasonal ice cream). A lavender crème brûlée is a gentle rendition, the deconstructed huckleberry crumb a clever interpretation, and the rum baba, a small cake with liquor and whipped cream, a more decadent choice.

Expect the menu to continue to evolve; both Gomes and the Florios travel often to Europe and return inspired. Gomes especially values his time away; it's too easy, he says, to be consumed by the day to day. He likes to see what is happening, have time to think.

Indeed, it feels right to see the philosophy of this neighborhood restaurant evolve. The Carbine model was admirable, a much-needed spark in a state with so many local riches. New Jersey, inexplicably, was so far behind and the Carbines' philosophy inspired so many others to showcase local ingredients. Yet admittedly, their strict definition of local occasionally got in the way of a good dinner, as if the restaurant were more about the idea than about the food.

Clearly, ATH now is all about the food. And now that we're more educated about farm-to-table, both as chefs and consumers, we can expect, and demand, a more thoughtful, integrated, evolved dining philosophy. **D**

Photos by CATHY MILLER

➤ **THE VIBE:** Cozy neighborhood BYO emphasizing farm-fresh ingredients and simple preparations, but now with a European flair. ➤ **STANDOUT DISHES:** Octopus, gin-cured salmon, mussel pot, lamb saddle, duck.

homemade root beer bought from an Amish farm. The root beer adds a woody, saffras flavor to the pork. Still, root beer is not the only detail in the restaurant's carefully crafted recipe. O'Loughlin first chooses pork shoulder, which yields a more firm sandwich. (You don't want your pulled pork to be mushy, like a sloppy Joe, he says.) He smokes the pork for six hours before cooking it in root beer. He tops it with homemade coleslaw, which he seasons with sweet chili sauce instead of mayonnaise, along with red wine vinegar and a few other ingredients. "I won't tell

you everything."

Pulled pork notwithstanding, the added allure of the booth by Railside Cafe was the homemade breads (baguettes, semolina, Asiago cheese, cranberry walnut) and the coffee, rich and dark and aromatic — i.e., not your typical recreational center fare.

At Railside, the beans are roasted in-house, and they've always been roasted less than a month ago, says O'Loughlin, who, thanks to a friend in Jamaica, gets a good deal on all his coffee beans.

More than 1,200 people came to the Rahway event this year, so

many that organizers had to turn people away. The event is always a party, amped up with club music and attracting some big names in the food and beverage industry. It's also a good place to discover a few hidden gems.

Other local winners this year included Beana's Para Siempre, in Rahway, for Mexican food; and D'Orsi's Bakery, in Port Reading, for best dessert bakery. (For a complete list of winners, visit rahwaytaste.com.)

"I love that event," says O'Loughlin. "It's awesome. It gets bigger every year."

It's a small town inside an expansive building. **Bell Works** in Holmdel, the repurposing of the Bell Labs facility that opened this spring, has been touted as a unique and genius indoor workspace. The building is 2 million square feet, but the intent today is to foster, within that space, an intimate, collaborative environment. There's a library (the Holmdel Library and Learning Center), a Montessori school and community yoga events. An important public relations push has centered on the food court, as it were, with consistent shoutouts noting that Bell Works has attracted important chef names from New York. Yet, we find more encouragement in the culinary announcements that are made with less fanfare, including the notice that Bell Works hosted an indoor weekly farmers' market all summer. The market, an extension of Asbury Fresh, featured one of our favorite local chefs, Marita Lynn, who owned the now-shuttered Runa Peruvian Cuisine in Red Bank. (For more news about Lynn, visit mykitchenintuition.com.) **Booskerdoo**, an Asbury Park coffee roastery, also has an outpost at Bell Works. Local energy seems critical to the philosophy; without it, Bell Works risks becoming a workplace version of the shopping mall. You can't build a Jersey village without Jersey.

Farm-to-family dining, i.e., the diet of our ancestors, hardly describes the dinner process in America today. A new restaurant concept in Sea Girt hopes to address that disconnect. **Farmly**, by chef James Avery (of The Bonney Read, in Asbury Park), offers a selection of wholesome family dinners, slow-cooked meats and seasonal vegetables. Avery zeros in on superior ingredients, including organic chicken, antibiotic-free pork and organic local vegetables. His menu includes salads, soups and rotisserie chicken. Visit eatfarmly.com.

More than 63 percent of chefs report suffering from depression. One in four kitchen workers have suffered physical abuse. **Fair Kitchens** is a new organization created to help deal with the stress and inequalities of the industry. The group offers information, training and support. In New Jersey, chef John Vitale, of Caffe Anello in Westwood, serves as a group spokesman, sharing his tips for running a fair kitchen, creating a safe environment and empowering staff. Visit fairkitchens.com.