

Cognoscenti

magazine

Because life is short

JANOS RESTAURANT

At the Westin La Paloma Resort
Tucson, Arizona

Janos is the namesake of chef/proprietor Janos Wilder. With a lifelong attraction to the romance of *haute cuisine*, Janos worked in Bordeaux with Michelin-crowned chefs before bringing a touch of France to Southern Arizona, opening his first restaurant there nearly twenty years ago. He likes to “combine ingredients with technique,” resulting in fascinating variations on Latin favorites. “We give diners something familiar but different,” he says.

Entering the restaurant, diners discover an elegant salon, very much in the French mold, where they can begin their meal with a glass of champagne before being seated in one of several tiered dining areas. The design style is classical, with ochre- and eggplant-colored walls adding touches of playfulness to the decorative mix. Large, semi-circular bay windows open on three sides towards city and desert. Walls are adorned with original artwork—all artists are local except for the spectacular Miró.

Once seated, we found the chairs—or should we say *thrones*—nice, but the armrests were too high to slide beneath the table, causing diners to bend forward over their dishes. Aesthetically, table vases in the shape of curvaceous tubes were too heavy for the delicate lilies they held. In the background, recorded musical selections ranged eclectically from madrigals to lyric opera.

In the *amuse-bouches*, we adored the citrus gravlax with potato salad and beet *coulis*—although the beet *coulis* might have been more plentiful. Shrimp with wasabi-



Southwestern and continental influences at Janos: Guaymas shrimp and papaya salad

infused potato purée, peppers and kalamata olives, was finished in butter sauce—a deep, delicate combination.

Among the appetizers, seared sea scallops with caramelized cauliflower, mushrooms and pea *coulis* came off a little flat. On the other hand, guava-roasted duck with desert pear essence was memorable: the sauce, extracted from prickly pear cactus, was spiced with cardamom and cinnamon, and strengthened with veal stock to create a ruby-colored, sticky, delectable sauce. (Who would have dreamed such complexity could be wrought from a cactus?)

The use of lime vinaigrette to enhance the flavors of chilled Guaymas shrimp and papaya salad showed real creativity, as did the presentational flourish of diced cantaloupe and pomegranate seeds lining the

plate. More inspiration of the Southwestern variety emerged in bacon-wrapped quail stuffed with pork *carnitas* and *pasilla* chilies, the hubbard squash and Johnny cake contributing a pleasantly hearty note.

Tender veal loin with tender lobster made a nice marriage of textures, but the delicate flavor of the veal was rather overpowered by the potency of the lobster sauce. We found the braised beef short rib with wine-poached onions and horseradish cream the weakest of the dishes we sampled in terms of both presentation and flavor concentration.

Wine Director Ryan Schwartz “favors wines that work well with the food we serve, wines with good acidity and little oak, so that they can cut through flavors.” He tries to give clients “something they’ve never had before, and at good value.”

We began with Nino Franco’s *Prosecco di Valdobbiadene*—crisp and unexceptional. Next came glasses of *Morgadio* Albariño (Rias Baixas) with a bouquet of petrol; the best came last: a bottle of Rosso di Montalcino *Vigna della Forte*. This Sangiovese from the superb 1999 Tuscan vintage showed black cherry, plum and road tar, a bristling backbone, and finished on notes of pepper and cinnamon: quite dark in mood and quite to our liking.

A dessert-tray of three chocolate confections arrived—the chocolate soufflé was outstanding. Sommelier Ryan Schwartz soon joined us at table for an impromptu tasting of vintage Armagnac: a 1974 *Francis Darroze*, 7 yrs in cask, and a 1975 *Domaine du Rieston Lacquy-Landes*—the ‘74 showed better.

At Janos, the dishes we sampled revealed surprising—even entrancing—flavor contrasts. The fascinating mélange of Southwestern and continental influences was pulled off very successfully, yielding subtlety and sophistication without flatness or confusion of flavors.

Janos Restaurant
3770 East Sunrise Drive
Tucson, Arizona 85718
Ph: (520) 615-6100
www.janos.com

This article was written by Jeffrey Riggs, Senior Contributing Editor to *Cognoscenti Magazine*.

© 2003 Cognoscenti Magazine