

ICON

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Dining

ROBERT GORDON

VINE & FIG

FROM THE WINDOW SEAT in Vine & Fig, Doylestown's County Theater glints across State Street like a Frank Capra odeon at the heart of Bedford Falls. From that perch recently, with a bazillion fluffed-up flakes alighting on sidewalk and street, I felt like a player inside a snow-globe scene. I may even have peered out that huge picture window searching for a young, snow-blinded Henry Fonda. He wasn't in the globe, I'm sure, or his angel, Clarence, would most certainly have beckoned him into Vine & Fig Tree Bistro. In mood and food, Vine & Fig radiates that Bedford Falls kind of warmth and insouciance. Oh, there's nothing fancy about the place. That's for sure. The Vine & Fig is a tiny space sans the chic linens and chi-chi trappings found in more elegant, established emporiums. But the food here is a testament to the power of old and new. The timeless axioms of gastronomy find harmony and balance with the new ones, and optimize today's expanded pantry and techniques in the process.

Owner Drew Abbate hearkens his passion for food to his days growing up in Northern Jersey. With whimsical pride, he reconstructs those days with a series of browning, old photos. Everything does not look worse in black and white—with due respect to Paul Simon. Drew's revered family photos show his huge Italian family dining under nature's canopy. They underscore appreciation of the timeless power in nature. Unleashing that power is axiomatic in the old culinary philosophies—the ones we revere today.

Drew recalls: "In summer, our extended family—we were all Italian—rented a plot of land in Parsippany. That was family headquarters



for the summer. We ate alfresco. The food was fresh and scrumptious every single day. If food didn't come from our garden, or out of the lake, or fresh out of a butcher shop, it wouldn't make our table. My parents and their siblings came from Italy, and they clung to that tradition. It's programmed inside me. It's my inspiration for Vine & Fig—both the name and the concept. Food fresh off the vine and cooking with Mediterranean philosophy will always be my Muse."

Drew has some impressive stays on his resume—working with master chefs who taught him to mate technique with that philosophy. He spent several years working with the now-legendary Jean-Pierre and several more at Evermay on the Delaware. Each was an emporium of impeccable dining. As he gets established, he'll eventually appoint his own eatery a few notches higher in swankiness. At the moment, however, he's focused on food. He's devoted to providing upscale breakfasts, lunches and dinners in his Bedford Falls-like digs. That's a tall order, but Drew is doing it. In fact, his dinner menu boasts some destination dishes, the kind that sets foodie feet a-trekkin'.

On an ambitious menu categorized into Appetizers, Salads, Entrées and Desserts, my favorite dish remains Pan Seared Duck Breast with Pears and Fresh Figs. Yes, with the name Vine & Fig Tree Bistro, you'd expect the fig theme to recur throughout the menu. So it does—tastefully. The plate is presented tantalizingly. Appetizing presentations are a hallmark in this eatery. In fact, since this is such a

petite bistro, the presentations are all the more superb. Several slices of succulent, rich duck breast paint a corner of a huge white dish in rosy red and brown hues. Several thin slices of pear spoke out radially alongside the meat. Orange slices, impeccably cleaned, a mass of celestial gleaming white and a medley of figs, plum tomatoes lend fresh Mediterranean harmonies to an outstanding dish that reflects Drew's philosophy in pristine colors of nature. I confess that I become a boring eater at Vine & Fig. I can't resist ordering this dish each visit rather than exploring and enjoying other delicious options.

I've enjoyed two versions of Fried Goat Cheese with Honey. One plates three huge white globes of cheese glistening with honey with a petite pie filled with glistening pickled onions and other veggie goodies. In another version, the pickled onions are served with crusty Italian focaccia and three slices of fresh pear rather than the petite pie. Capellini with Fresh Lemon and Kalamata Olives underscore the Italian/Mediterranean flavor essential. The capellini is light and scrumptious. Lemony overtones lend a just-right hint of citrusy soul and the olives give earthy oomph to the ensemble.

The Caponata (Eggplant) Compote packs mid-Med, Sicilian gusto. The vivid fresh flavors in the supporting cast of tomatoes, green olives, capers, and celery make the eggplant sing in strident tones atop the accompanying crusty tomato bread. A mountain of Mussels mound high from a pool of light tomato broth. Grilled Garlic Sausage with Broccoli Rabe is a spicy treat. For \$11.50, you're served an entrée portion of meaty, hefty sausage, redolent of garlic, along with a huge tangle of deep green broccoli rabe that kicks in with delicate bitter undertones.

There are four salads. All are well conceived and tasty. Grapes and walnuts, even asiago cheese—ingredients of more expensive, less mundane saladry—add grace, taste and style to the Vine salad, priced at \$4. All the salads flash spark. The Fig Tree Salad—field greens speckled with walnuts, dried cranberry and fresh figs—reels in bright tastes. A Citrus Ahi Tuna Salad beds sushi-grade tuna in Romaine lettuce mined copiously with orange supremes, red onions, caper berries and tomato.

There are six entrées on the regular menu. Capellini & Scallops is a standout. Tapping the citrusy-earthly power of lemon juice and kalamata olives, the Chef layers delicious swirls on to the buttery pasta and succulent scallops. With Pan-Seared Salmon, he demonstrates prudence in balancing ingredients. The bite of Swiss chard plays counterpoint to the sweetness of pan-seared salmon. White beans irrigated with a yummy yellow tomato sauce lend singular riffs to the flavor symphony. Filet of Rainbow Trout is stuffed with fennel, tomato, lemon, and herbs in another pleasing dish.

Drew also makes his own desserts on site. The lemon tart is unique. Angelically light crust halves surround a mammoth pool of lemon filling in Drew's take on this standard. It's the best I've ever had. You'll find other choices on the dessert to surrender to your temptations.

Bedford Falls never ate like this—not like extended Italian families did in a bygone era that Drew Abbate is rekindling. Once foodies get a taste of Vine & Fig Tree Bistro, I believe that kindling will catch fire and burn for a long while. ■