

Restaurant Review | New chef, same paradise at Zoës

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In June, Zoës Steak and Seafood had its first change at the range since opening in 2003 with Jerry Weibrechtas the chef/owner.

He had a loyal following, so it was of utmost importance that Zoës find an equally talented chef to replace him.

The restaurant gods appeared to be smiling down on owners, husband and wife Bill and Joni Greene, and Marc Sauter, because Zoës new chef is worthy of his own following.

Jesse Wykle, who made a name for himself as chef at the Eurasia Cafe' and Wine Bar from 2010 to 2014, had recently left to start up Delta Table, a "chef-for hire" company. He agreed to be Zoës chef consultant until they hired a new one. He became the replacement after accepting an offer to be chef/owner.

Zoës has been a foodie's paradise. Things aren't going to change with Wykle helming the kitchen.

The chef and his culinary crew are focused on quality fresh ingredients and local, sustainable fare whenever possible. Then they combine it all in a creative and appealing way, prepared with care.

Wykle's arrival came with a charcuterie program, featuring a daily "Chef's Plate," showcasing house-cured meats with accompaniments.

A recent offering included maple clove-cured lomo (pork), smoked duck prosciutto, brandy foie gras au torchon, jumbo chicharron (homemade pork rind) and La tur - a creamy Italian cheese made with cow, goat and sheep milk similar to Brie, but earthier with a tang. Caperberries, candied garlic, house bread-and-butter pickles, and baguette slices rounded out the plate that was as pretty as a picture.

It was a great start with wine, while the stress of the work week melted away.

Having been wowed several years ago by Wykle's foie gras PB&J with pine nut butter and peach jam, I knew "foie gras decadence" (\$15) was a must- have. The perfectly prepared Hudson Valley foie gras, was luscious with grilled gingerbread and grape jalapeno jelly.

Typically, I'm a purist when it comes to Caesar salads, having mastered the classical preparation while in culinary school. Zoës Southern Caesar (\$9) changed my ways. The salad has grilled romaine adorned with Parmesan strips and bacon anchovy jam, garnished with two beet-pickled quail eggs and crisp cornbread crostini. It was a

delightful twist.

Wykle displayed his meat prowess with the charcuterie plate. The skills continued into the seafood section of the menu as a seared tuna (\$30), with a white-and-black sesame studded coat and a beautiful rare center, was delicious. Accompanying kimchi-braised collards gave it quite a kick, while coconut foam provided a bit of a coolant.

From the sides selection, "blue crab mac-n-cheese" (\$8) was sumptuous with lump crab and a blend of creamy cheeses. It will be difficult to not want this decadent treat every time I visit.

If steak is more of what you are looking for, Zoës has got you covered with five selections that are Certified Angus Beef, wet-aged for 28 days, with a choice of several toppings for a small added charge. The 16-ounce boneless New York strip (\$32), prepared a perfect medium-rare with simple seasoning, was totally toothsome.

The staff even serves the basics well. A cup of hot chocolate (\$5/\$9), made with Valrhona dark chocolate was rich and satisfying with a side dollop of whipped cream.

As if the food wasn't impressive enough, Zoës service is spot-on from the moment that you drive into the parking lot with valet attendant to the final exit out the door.

During our recent visit I had foolishly left my eyeglasses at home. Fortunately the hostess stand had a collection of cheaters where I found one to claim as my own for the evening. When the meal was reaching its end, our server offered to have our boxed leftovers whisked away to our car via valet - an excellent touch, especially for those of us who tend to leave them behind.

Zoës is the total fine dining package minus any pretentiousness. In the not-too-distant future, a state-of-the-art exhibition kitchen will be added, where cooking classes and intimate wine dinners will be offered. Just another reason to love Zoës for dining entertainment.

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