A Taste of College

The University of Delaware’s student-run Vita Nova gets an A+.  By Suzanne Loudermilk

When you enter Vita Nova restaurant, you are greeted warmly by a hostess and escorted into a hushed dining room, where piped-in jazz soothes frazzled, after-work nerves and a toned-down bustle in the open kitchen promises a skilled cooking staff.

Put aside any notion that this student-run operation will be anything less than professional. In fact, in all my years of restaurant reviewing, I easily put this experience in my top 10 — especially for the price — including a memorable visit to a two-star Michelin restaurant, La Côte Saint Jacques, in France. And it’s right in Newark.  

VITA NOVA  17 W. Main St., Trabant University Center, second floor, Newark, 831-0500, www.lerner.udel.edu/departments/hrim/vita-nova-restaurant / PRICES: Tasting menu $30-$44.  

Grilled Berkshire pork chop, Caesar salad, nitro banana split.
CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE PAGE: Grilled Berkshire pork chop with broccoli rabe and lentil caviar; dining room manager Nicholas Waller; caramelized onion flatbread with toasted walnuts, goat cheese and honey; executive chef Joe DiGregorio
The University of Delaware hospitality department has been training chefs, maître d’s, servers and sommeliers for more than 25 years. Grads include Dana Herbert, class of ’98, owner of Desserts by Dana in Newark and winner of TLC’s first season of “Next Great Baker,” and Maria Tampakis, class of ’08, head chef at Gordon Ramsay’s Heddon Street Kitchen in London.

The students in UD’s Dinner Lab rotate positions. One night, they may toss your salad. The next, they may open your bottle of wine. Of course, there is expert supervision to shepherd them through every aspect of the restaurant experience.

As a diner, all you have to do is sit back and be treated like a cherished guest at one of the cloth-covered tables in the modern, Scandinavian-influenced room. Small votive candles add a warm glow, and a bank of windows overlooks a stately, blue-gray-stone church that has been transformed into a study hall. Once you’ve parked in the garage next door and jockeyed through throngs of students to reach the second level of the Trabant University Center where the restaurant is located, it’s hard to believe you’re on a college campus. Dinner is served Wednesday through Friday. An informal lunch is available Monday through Friday.

Our meal started with a basket of artisan breads—a cheddar-onion roll, a soft, fat breadstick and an airy popover—along with a square of sweet butter sprinkled with black Hawaiian sea salt. The prix-fixe tasting menu also includes an appetizer trio, salad, an intermezzo, entrée and dessert.

The beautifully plated appetizers, all set on a white rectangular plate, showcased a lightly fried slice of green tomato with a dollop of lump crab, a sprinkle of pea shoots and a squiggle of spicy rémoulade; dainty roasted beets tossed with baby arugula, goat

The Scandinavian-influenced dining room
cheese, polenta croutons and a Port-wine vinaigrette; and a satisfyingly rich butternut squash-fennel soup with candied pumpkin seeds, cumin and Greek yogurt.

The salads were equally appealing. The signature salad was reminiscent of the tropics, with greens dotted with candied walnuts, jicama, mandarin oranges, Asiago cheese and toasted coconut, all subtly coated with tangerine vinaigrette. The classic Caesar—styled after chef Caesar Cardini’s original 1924 recipe, according to the menu—lived up to expectations, with crisp romaine and wonderfully garlicky dressing. An updated Parmesan crisp poked jauntily out of the greens.

As the intermezzo, a scoop of refreshing rose-pepper sorbet arrived encased in dome-covered lids that were ceremoniously lifted as the plates were set down like prized trophies. The grilled Berkshire pork chop, the size of Joe Flacco’s hand, was a whopper, sitting atop briny pearls of lentil caviar and sautéed broccoli rabe. A lush rosemary sauce and persillade—a fragrant parsley-garlic mix—covered the meat like a quilt. The pan-seared Faroe Island salmon was an excellent specimen, with fork-tender, rosy-hued flesh and a satisfying beurre-blanc. Black rice, bright-green edamame and roasted shallots added color and flavor.

We decided to pass on the tempting dessert sampler—a chocolate caramel cupcake, a pumpkin whoopie pie, and a phyllo pastry with vanilla and custard. No, we weren’t crazy. We had our eye on the nitro banana split, prepared tableside, for an additional $5 a person. It’s quite a show of molecular gastronomy.

Two students clad in black, looking like ninjas and wearing goggles, prepared a pink guava cream base in a bowl before adding foggy nitrogen to freeze the mixture. It was then distributed into individual dishes and served with chocolate-dipped bananas, grilled pineapple, homemade wet nuts, whipped cream and cherries as toppings. A sundae has never been this much fun.

The students, all seniors the night we visited, were polite and helpful, whatever restaurant position they were assuming. They were happy to tell us about the wines of the day, a particular preparation—heeding to the kitchen for answers if they were unsure—and even what they hope to do in the future. These are millennials who will make a difference.

Vita Nova may be one of Delaware’s best-kept secrets. We would like to keep it that way. But these students deserve your visit—and so do you.