



The Artful Diner

Jersey Restaurant Blog
By Art Namendorf

Gourmand's Gestalt

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Categories: [Artful Diner Review](#)

Chakra

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By The Artful Diner

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Photo by Arthur R. Namendorf

Chakra -- a name inspired by the ancient Yoga systems of India -- is a kaleidoscope of scintillating shadow and shimmering candlelight. The dining area is energetically and passionately expansive -- some would say cavernous. However, embellished with striking Cambodian reliefs embraced by 120-year-old textured stone, plush velvet-pillowed gauze-curtained banquettes, palm trees, and colorful cascading wall of water, it still manages to exude a delicious intimacy. And, given the presence of the serious singles crowd populating the low-slung tables and ottomans adjacent to the

attractive mahogany bar, the scene fairly pulsates with a subtly sophisticated sensuality.

But allow me to extend the metaphor just a bit... This form of hot-and-heavy, atmospherically charged culinary foreplay only takes one so far. The coming of the cuisine is the moment of truth, so to speak... and it has been known to leave the diner feeling furiously frustrated and decidedly ill-used. After all, the assertion that the quality of a given establishment's food may often be measured in direct inverse proportion to the quality of its view or ambiance is not without significant basis in fact.

How very fortunate, therefore, that **Chakra's** exotic surroundings and equally alluring menu prove a perfect match. And, interestingly enough, when our party paid several calls recently, the new executive chef, Nelson Martinez, formerly the exec at Duvet in New York City, had been the power behind the stove for a scant two weeks... but you would never have known. His presentations proved to be picture perfectly pristine -- attractive but not pretentious -- and the preparation and innovative integration of ingredients, flawless.

Chakra's cuisine is foundationally New American, but it also benefits from an intriguing variety of inventive European and Asian subtexts. And this exciting and exceedingly sawy coalescence of diverse culinary traditions is just one of the reasons why this restaurant has remained, even after four years, more than just a "place to be." It is, most assuredly, a dining destination.

And a completely unencumbered and straightforward side dish, sauteed bok choy, is a superlative indicator of what Mr. Martinez's kitchen is all about. It exhibits just the right texture, firm to the bite yet tender, and the finishing touch is a splash of ginger-soy sauce imbued with a hint of honey. Utterly sublime in its apparent simplicity. And speaking of sublime... nothing quite matches the addictively silky consistency of the roasted garlic potato puree. Two comparatively simple presentations... prepared to perfection.

During his previous tenures, Mr. Martinez was known for his seafood preparations, and that affinity is also palpable at **Chakra**. His honey-glazed salmon, for example, tantalizes with just a hint of sweetness, which is beautifully counterpoised via a savory seabed of diminutive French fries, fava beans, corn, and a dill & Fine Herb salad. But even



Photo by Arthur R. Namendorf
Honey-Glazed Salmon



Photo by Arthur R. Namendorf
Cioppino

better, in my opinion, is the positively superlative cioppino, a recent special. The foundation is a sumptuous seafood broth followed by a layer of grilled sourdough bread -- the perfect utensil to lap up every last drop of the addictive ambrosia. The crowning touch is a tempting tier of pristinely fresh bay scallops, shrimp, mussels, calamari, moist & meaty morsels of red snapper, and consummating drizzle of olive oil.

Starters also carry on the seafood theme with style. The chef offers a daily sashimi preparation, a selection of West Coast oysters, and a provocative hamachi tartare embellished with chopped mango, cilantro, and yuzu juice (juice from a Japanese citrus fruit that tastes like a mixture of lemon and lime).

My favorites in this regard, however, are the tempura shrimp and lemon-basil fried calamari. In the former, the pristinely crunchy crustaceans are caressed by an ethereal batter and embellished with a zippy mango vinaigrette; in the latter, rings of inordinately tender squid are accompanied by a heady roasted garlic & balsamic aioli.

Other excellent appetizer possibilities include three beautifully textured spinach-ricotta ravioli set on a pillow of tomato fondue and a mizuna-, frisee-driven grilled portobello salad adorned with feta cheese and a light but assertive balsamic vinaigrette... And those in search of meatier entrees will not be disappointed with either the grilled New York strip or the herb-crust rack of lamb with white bean puree, wilted chard, and tomato marmalade.



Photo by Arthur R. Namendorf
Spinach-Ricotta Ravioli



Photo by Arthur R. Namendorf
Poached Pear Tart

Desserts, courtesy of pastry chef Alfredo Deras, are as innovatively sophisticated as their predecessors. The poached pear tart, for example, is a picture-perfect rendition. The pear is poached in red wine, sliced, and then cuddled up to a phyllo dough nest filled with red wine gelato. The finishing touch is a red wine anglaise. The seasonal fruit tart is equally recommendable and consummated with vanilla *creme* and Frangelico sauce, while the white & dark chocolate fondue comes replete with deliciously dipable strawberries and fritters.

Since **Chakra** is the recipient of the *Wine Spectator* "Best of Award of Excellence," the fruit of the vine plays an exceedingly prominent role. The wine list, cleverly conceived and cosmopolitan in scope, is certainly enough to give any red-blooded oenophile serious preparatory palpitations... and there are enough first-rate choices in the moderate range to keep over-zealous tippers out of bankruptcy court.

There are also some very nice selections available by the glass. The 2006 Kris Pinot Grigio from Italy is eminently quaffable; but the 2007 Villa Maria Sauvignon Blanc from Marlborough, New Zealand, has infinitely more character. In the red wine department, the 2005 Silver Palm Cabernet Sauvignon is rife with lush chocolate and berry fruit overtones. A real winner.

The Bottom Line: As the restaurant just recently inaugurated its [new fall menu](#), a number of items mentioned in this review may no longer be available. Be that as it may... in contrast to the numerous one-dimensional eateries holding court out there, **Chakra** is a gourmand's gestalt. Yes, the diverse culinary constituents -- exotic ambiance, superlative cuisine, award-winning wine list, and first-class service -- are all present and accounted for. But the whole of this establishment is infinitely more than the sum of its individual parts. And, even after four years, it still remains one of the most provocative dining destinations ever to grace the Garden State culinary scene. Above all, however, **Chakra** is a restaurant that must be **experienced** rather than just described.

Cuisine: New American with European and Asian Subtitles

Hours: Lunch: Mon - Fri, 11:30 a.m. - 2:30 p.m.; Dinner: Mon - Weds, 5:00 p.m. - 10:00 p.m.; Thurs - Sat, 5:00 p.m. - 11:00 p.m.; Sun, 5:00 p.m. - 9:00 p.m.;

Lounge: Mon - Weds, remains open until 12:00 midnight; Thurs - Sat, until 2:00 a.m.

Credit Cards: All major

Attire: Smart casual

Reservations: Recommended

Parking: Onsite; valet on weekends

Alcohol: License; award-winning wine list

Price: Appetizers, \$8.00 - \$18.00; Entrees, \$25.00 - \$36.00

Handicapped Accessible: Yes

Website: www.chakrarestaurant.com

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