


A photograph of a chef, likely the owner or head chef of Cork Restaurant, smiling warmly. He is wearing a white chef's jacket and a watch on his left wrist. The background is a vibrant, textured red wall. The chef is sitting on a stool, leaning forward slightly.

Cork Restaurant

29 North Boulevard of Presidents
By June LeBell. Photos by Salvatore Brancifort.

After five years in Sarasota, I've become familiar with most of Saint Armands Circle; but, ask me to find an address, and I'm as lost as a first-time tourist. After some consideration, I figured that Cork, the newest restaurant at 29 North Boulevard of Presidents, must be on one of the spokes. Sure enough, there it was, white linen table cloths waving in the breeze from the modern, sleek edifice that has emerged as a two-floor, multi-purpose restaurant that sings like the Sirens, inviting us to sit, eat, drink, read the paper or celebrate an anniversary.

A close-up photograph of a Maine Lobster Parfait. The parfait is served in a clear glass bowl and consists of a base of white macaroni and cheese, topped with chunks of cooked lobster, shredded white cheddar cheese, and finely chopped green chives. A long, golden-brown, sesame-seeded fried breadstick is placed vertically on the left side of the bowl. The background is a soft-focus light green surface with thin green lines.

Downstairs at what's still known as The Bottle Shop is the informal brasserie, conjuring up memories of the best of New York City, from Balthazar in SoHo to Les Halles in the east twenties. "It's a tight, Americanized, classic brasserie menu," says Mac deCarle, the executive chef at Cork. With familiar, yet revised temptations like Croque Monsieur (sweet Virginia ham and gruyere cheese sandwich) and Mussels Frites ("I changed it to mussels, instead of moules, so it would be a little more American and homey," says deCarle) one feels both pampered and comfy.

There's even a Steak au Poivre Vert with a side of White Mac & Cheese for kids and adults alike in search of comfort. There's also a yummy Flamiche, a crustless leek and egg tart with gruyere and bacon lardon, for those in search of the perfect quiche by-a-different name.

Maine Lobster Parfait

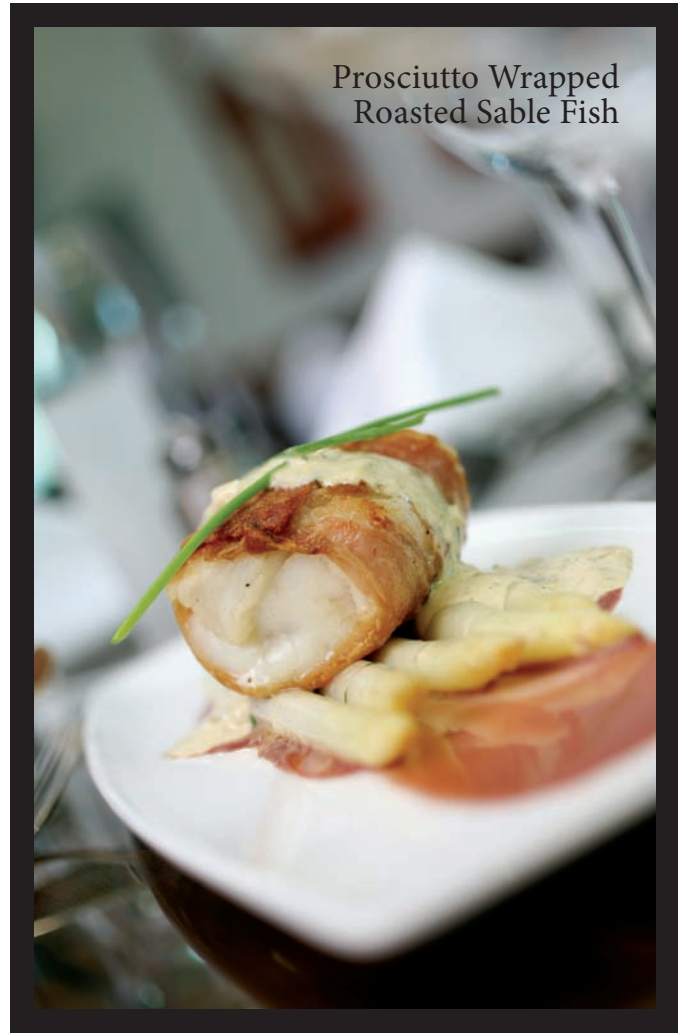
“You can come alone, pick a great wine from our Thirty Under \$30 wine list and sit outside with your dog, have a brasserie treat and read a good book,” suggests deCarle. “Or you can bring the whole family and feel at home and welcomed.”

Upstairs, known as Cork, the spirit is a bit more formal, but just as welcoming nonetheless. Paintings, courtesy of Allyn Gallup Contemporary Art, adorn the walls, and the seating, from blush banquets to simply dressed tables, breathes elegance with ease. Cork is “fine dining with continental food from the ‘30’s and ‘40’s,” says deCarle. “It’s not scientific or fluffy,” he adds, referring to new trends in food. “My inspiration comes from the old Chassins and Sardi’s. The food isn’t overdressed with competing flavors, stacks and flowers on the plates. It’s minimalist in a very attractive way. This is my dream menu.”

Behind the scenes, you may find nothing but dedication and love. Chef deCarle, who spent a decade at Beach Bistro under the tutelage of Sean Murphy, has learned that “service and the patrons” are what it’s all about. deCarle had been acquainted with Jeffrey Trefry, Cork’s managing partner, for many years from church and work (Café L’Europe, prior to deCarle’s stint at Beach Bistro). “Jeff has charm, integrity and a work ethic second to none,” says deCarle. Integrity is the almighty character necessary for the restaurant business. “It helps to work with people of like minds and ethics, especially since you’re all trying to get something new started,” deCarle adds.



Prime New York Strip



Prosciutto Wrapped
Roasted Sable Fish

As such, the entire staff fits the bill. Jeremy Hammond-Chambers is the Chef de cuisine upstairs, a Scottish-born chef who spent much time working in New York City with Daniel Boulud. Seth Groseclose, the downstairs counterpart, worked with deCarle quite a bit before Cork. DeCarle continues to reflect on his menu as he introduces his chefs. “Dessert is a really important part of the meal,” says deCarle, who’s not much into creating pastries but loves to dream them up. “Heidi Nelson is our really phenomenal pastry chef. Dessert is the last impression a patron has of a restaurant. It has to be right, with intense flavors; something they’ll take home and remember forever. Heidi does that for us,” says deCarle.

DeCarle loves all the food, stemming from a familial connection to some of the dishes. “My grandmother was a great cook, and was the inspiration for some of the menu. Our Lamb Kidneys, cast-iron sautéed and finished with a Fino dry sherry, brown butter and roasted Cippolini O’Brien potatoes, came from her recipes. A couple of Englishmen who were here a few days ago claimed they were the finest kidneys they’d ever tasted.”

Cork may be new but there’s something old world and charming about it that immediately puts one at ease. Perhaps the best way to describe Cork and its immediate success is as deCarle says, “The best way to a patron is through his stomach.” And Cork knows how to do just that. *S*