

# upstairs, downstairs

Double your dining pleasure at Cork and The Bottle Shop:  
summer Sunday brunch at OohLa La! Continental Bistro  
and more. By John Bancroft



## AT CORK AND THE BOTTLE SHOP,

the first grace note sounds soon after you're seated. It's in the butter.

Whether you choose the informal cafe/brasserie/bar downstairs (The Bottle Shop), where the butter might be alive with the tang of fresh orange, or the more formal restaurant upstairs (Cork), where the butter might owe its pop to cardamom and orange blossom honey, that little surprise will put you at ease, confident that you are in good hands.

The fresh breads are very good, too, but that's to be expected in any establishment worth its salt. It's the small things—like the butter—that signal a kitchen's intention to attend to every little detail of menu and preparation.

In this case, make that kitchens. Chef Mac deCarle, formerly of Beach Bistro, oversees not one line of sous chefs and cooks but two—one downstairs and another up-

stairs. Each venue in the old Bottle Shop's newly renovated building on the north spoke of St. Armands Circle has its own menu, decor, bar, wine list and service staff, too.

Sarasota architect Guy Peterson oversaw the redesign, which resulted in a harmonious mix of two versions of modern style under one roof. Downstairs is all terrazzo, glass, metallic surfaces and right angles. The design upstairs is just as cool and clean, but with softer edges. The

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bar downstairs is straight out of *The Jetsons*, while the upstairs bar is clubbier and features a pair of upholstered horseshoe booths. The kitchen downstairs is open to the main seating area; the kitchen upstairs is out of sight (and earshot). Bare tables downstairs, fully dressed tables upstairs. You get the idea.

Both approaches work because well thought-out, varied menus and wine lists take their appropriate places center stage. Our only quibble after three visits was uneven service, but then Cork and The Bottle Shop opened at the height of season, when experienced wait staff can be hard to come by.

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Given the young enterprise's culinary chops and design flair, we feel sure the service will sort itself out.

Soups, salads, brick oven pizzas and familiar brasserie/bistro fare reign downstairs. We especially liked a fall-off-the-bone-tender braised lamb shank with leeks, orange and rosemary served on soft polenta. Just as good were the moules frites, in which a mound of shoestring fries topped a bowl of fresh, sweet mussels steamed with shaved fennel and garlic and accented by the anise-flavored snap of pastis liqueur. The fries were less successful in steak frites, but the beef, grilled medium rare and topped with maitre d' butter, was a winner.

A superb starter that appears on both menus is the crab bisque. Generous lumps of blue crab, flown in live from the Maryland shore and other East Coast waters, are the strong foundation of this creamy delight, the crab's rich flavor and texture spiked by good sherry and brandy. Just as delightful is a cool, chunky gazpacho of fresh, locally grown heirloom and hothouse tomatoes, served downstairs.

Chef deCarle has a thing for tomatoes. Fresh local Romas are the starting point for what the menu declares, truthfully, to be "double-strength tomatoes." The ripe red fruit first gets a dusting of salt and pepper and a drizzle of olive oil and is then slow-roasted in the cafe's brick oven.

Those heat-fortified tomatoes play a central role in a pizza and a Niçoise salad downstairs and in the orange- and coriander-crusting tuna served upstairs, which combines them with braised fennel, olives and pine nuts in a savory main dish. A good starter with this one is the breakfast radish salad, which combines the mildest of crisp radishes with a bit of goat cheese, tarragon and dried cherries.

Another gorgeous crust, this one the result of an assertive smoked salt-and-sugar rub before grilling, encases Cork's prime New York strip. This beautiful steak is nicely set off by the profoundly dark and earthy flavor of roasted mushrooms and Jerusalem artichokes.

Is red meat your go-to dish? Then you might opt for Cork's over-the-top, bone-in filet Rossini with foie gras and sliced truffle. This extravaganza may not slim your waistline, but at \$64—by far the priciest item on a varied menu (the next highest price point is \$39)—it certainly will do that to your wallet.

Upstairs offerings featuring fish include a Livorno-style fish pot, which mixes fish and shellfish in a tomato-based broth, as well as a starter of pomegranate gravlax. In this cool variation on a Scandinavian appetizer of ancient pedigree, wild ivory salmon is skillfully house-cured with cardamom and the dish's namesake fruit, then served with a smooth goat cheese crema and a relish that features enough caper berries even for a fiend like me.

And while you're ordering, be sure to advise your waiter that you'll somehow manage to save room for pastry chef Heidi Nelson's pitch-perfect rendition of the classic chocolate soufflé, punctured tableside and ladled with crème Anglaise. Trust me: you won't be sorry.

For dessert downstairs, take a chance and go for the peanut butter and banana griddle cakes, a twist on Elvis's favorite sandwich but a whole lot lighter. The main ingredients are grilled between slices of brioche, drizzled with chocolate and plated with whipped cream on the side. Two of us happily shared this unlikely creation, but it could easily have served four.

Downstairs, we were impressed with the "Thirty Under Thirty" list of thoroughly likable bottles from most of the major wine regions, all chosen for their value. The choices upstairs are equally pleasing but a bit pricier; we selected a nicely nuanced Bethel Heights pinot noir from Oregon's Willamette Valley from the middle of the list at \$51.

Both lists offer a good selection of wines by the glass and both venues feature full bars. If you're going from dinner to a party you can even pick up a well-chilled bottle or two of Veuve Cliquot's Yellow Label on the way out the door.

Now *that's* full service.

## **CORK** upstairs (formal dining)

## **THE BOTTLE SHOP**

downstairs (cafe/brasserie/bar)

29 N. Boulevard of the Presidents,  
St. Armands Circle, Sarasota  
(941) 388-2675

Continuous service downstairs

11 a.m. -10 p.m. daily

Dinner upstairs 5:30-10 p.m. daily

VISA, MC, AMEX, DISCOVER

Handicapped accessible

Parking on street and in municipal parking lots