

Warming to Global

Chef Brunet brings international flavors to Ballantyne

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My fork had barely delivered the densely luxurious, velvety squid ink risotto onto my taste buds when the "taste-recognition alarm" focused my memory on an exquisite week of eating in Cap Ferrat, a tiny, French, rocky outcropping on the Mediterranean Sea. When I mentioned having this sensational dish once before on Cap Ferrat, Chef and owner Bernard Brunet quickly replied that he had once offered the dish, Nero Risotto, as a chef in the Grand-Hotel de Cap Ferrat. A bit spooky, but it is a small world, after all. Brunet and his wife Shannon opened the 50-seat Global Restaurant in Ballantyne in June of 2006. Their idea was to bring the world on a plate to far-south Charlotte. Global is located in a back area of the Toringdon office complex (near Earth Fare). "We are a destination restaurant. It's like Barrington's (Bruce Moffet's restaurant in SouthPark)," Brunet remarks. "If you're good, the clientele will seek you. And they are tired of shopping centers. Here they can talk and converse."

Brunet is right that Global is not one of those convenient, see-me and be-seen places that are muscling their way throughout Charlotte. Global is intimate, even cozy, and all about food.

For Brunet, food is a passion. A native of Nice, France, he gained his culinary experience the European way: through apprenticeships and the firsthand knowledge he gained growing up in a food-oriented family. His grandfather was a pastry chef and his father owned a fish market. After training, Brunet worked in two three-Michelin-starred Parisian restaurants: Taillevent, and later under Chef Alain Sanderens in his Lucas Carton. Brunet then spent time in the United Kingdom (and learned English) and in a high-end French restaurant in St. Petersburg, Russia.

The inspiration for many of the recipes on Global's menu came from Brunet's love of France and the places he tasted while an executive chef on an international cruise ship. That is also the place the Brunets met and fell in love. (Is there a more romantic story?) Shannon, a native of Boone, N.C., was a vocalist and an event planner on the boat. Eventually, the couple came to the United States on the fateful day of Sept. 11, 2001. Brunet's first job in America was with a now-defunct restaurant also in the Ballantyne area. But the couple's dream was to open a small restaurant where they could earn a reputation for excellence.

Brunet's menu is a roster of near and total knockouts. Even if the taste isn't perfect, the oh-so-pretty presentation will blow you away. The dishes are labeled by countries or regions: India, Tahiti, Japan, Middle East, Italy, France, and Peru. Charlotte figures into the mix with a Pear and Brie Quesadilla with wild and domestic berry relish. Who knew we had such a yummy dish?



Brunet's creations seem ambitious and do take time to prepare, which leaves more time to converse. All items, except the bread, are made in-house. But the wait is truly worth it -- this is the kind of food that will leave a taste memory.

How could I not recommend the delicately spiced Moroccan lamb brochette on cous cous from Global's starter list? While the Louisiana crab cakes, another app, were a little too loose for my liking, the salads were smartly dressed and studded with soothing surprises. The most exceptional was the endive salad with blue cheese, pecans, and apples.

Serene as Brunet's plates appear, there is nothing sedate about their pleasures. The medallions of beef shoulder spiked with a wild mushroom blue cheese sauce accompanied by a potato gratin -- that only a French chef seems to make correctly -- is seamless bliss. The elegantly simple seared Ahi tuna, perhaps not the select quality noted in its menu description, is brilliantly paired with the darkly sublime Nero risotto.

Desserts here are slyly insinuating. The crème brulee is served as a threesome: mocha, vanilla and chocolate. As you try to decide which one is better, you quickly realize that all three have been inhaled by members of the table. Another offering has a raspberries and lemon mousse catapulting a lowly pound cake to giddy heights.

Global's wine roster is quite well chosen for the flavors and features varietals from across the globe -- even neighboring Virginia.

Starter prices range from \$8 to \$13 for Bombay fried oyster with green and yellow curries. Entrees range from \$16 for vegetarian Penne alla vodka to \$25 for a braise lamb shank. Of note: the menu also includes two "Sleek Physique" offerings.

Towards the evening's end, Chef Brunet makes his rounds to the tables and wants to know what you think about his food. Keep in mind, the supposed arrogance of French chefs is similar to American cowboy bravado in that it's a personal sense of confidence which, in Brunet's case, is justly deserved.

Even though Global is located in a small space, Brunet offers a large expanse of flavors, and food lovers will find a wonderfully exaggerated riff on world cuisine under his skillful French-trained hand.