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VISCERAL FORCE."  
MANOHLA DARGatz, *The New York Times*

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June 8, 2003

DINING

## DINING; French Fare, and a Water View, Beckon

By PATRICIA BROOKS

L'ESCALE in Greenwich is a new waterside restaurant whose French name means "port of call." This is descriptive enough as far as it goes, but it doesn't do justice to a place that is as handsome to look at as its food is delicious to taste.

The large elegant dining room is marked by a window wall that faces a dining terrace that in turn overlooks Indian Harbor.

Artistic touches abound: hand-crafted metal chandeliers, an intriguing sculpture at the front desk, an elongated candelabra that functions as an effective room divider. All are the work of Pascal Palun, an Avignon artist.

Looks alone do not a restaurant make. Fortunately, the expectation level that is raised by its welcoming provençal décor is surpassed by the food. The French menu is blessedly short. I couldn't resist the pan-seared foie gras (tremblingly pink inside), which played off exquisitely against a ribbon of crisp bacon and an ambrosial English pea purée.

Other starters came close: sizzling baby squid à la plancha (grilled) on a fresh salad with basil; roasted jumbo prawns with a smoky-char edge, served with Meyer lemon juice and greens; satiny house-smoked salmon with crunchy fennel slivers and a mild lemon-pepper cream dip; and a tissue-paper-thin, high quality beef carpaccio with baby arugula and shavings of Reggiano cheese. All were perfection.

The biggest appetizer thrill, though, was a surprising threesome: a soft-spoken golden gazpacho with an edge, punctuated by the crunch of toasted pumpkin seeds and an island of soothing avocado mousse. The three-way play of textures and tastes was subtle and sensational.

Leading a parade of entree successes was crispy duck breast - pink and tender slices with edges of crisp skin -- framed by golden chunks of roasted pineapple and served with whipped Yukon Gold potatoes. Grilled lamb chops with roasted apricots and toasted almonds were delicious and smartly presented as was crispy salmon with fennel slivers, fresh asparagus and oven-dried tomatoes, and roasted organic chicken with glazed chestnuts and a generous mix of wild mushrooms.

L'Escale bouillabaisse - a fragrant sea broth swimming with a gallimaufry of jumbo prawns, bits of monkfish, John Dory (a surprise), mussels and tiny clams - was properly served with a separate, slightly timid rouille, grated cheese and toast rounds. Another seafood dish, black bass (a substitute for the menu-listed sea bass, which had run out), had fine firm texture and taste, but its lemon broth lacked character.

Several desserts were enthralling, especially a semi-sweet chocolate tart (rich, divine chocolate) with an ambrosial house-made almond ice cream, and the black and white soufflé, which was puffy, fluffy and punctuated by a light pistachio sauce.

As you might expect in such surroundings, there were extra touches: a choice among four excellent breads (rye, sourdough, olive and fennel-raisin); an amuse-bouche of bite-size cheese puffs and, finally, petits fours.

The wine list, with bottle prices from \$41, has many French choices and selections from California and other parts of the world.

There were no serpents in this culinary garden of Eden, but one pesky discordant note was the service: not the busing, which was punctiliously efficient, but the wait staff.

Though cordial enough, our waitress one evening misread her clients, explaining what dishes were without being asked. When we inquired about the black and white soufflé -- wondering if it consisted of bitter and white chocolate -- she said, "Haven't you ever eaten a soufflé before?"

Another night our waiter forgot to refill our wine glasses and serve our petits fours. He also brought the check (unrequested) while we were still eating dessert. These would be nits at a lesser level of dining, but in this setting, one expects the ultimate in professionalism.

The waterfront locale is reason enough to cheer L'Escale, but this stylish place offers so much more. It is a port of call that should be on every food lover's itinerary.

L'Escale

500 Steamboat Road, Greenwich

(203)661-4600

Excellent

**ATMOSPHERE** -- A spacious, airy dining room evokes the spirit of an upscale restaurant in Provence, with oyster-colored off-white walls, back-lighted cabinets, a fireplace and tiled floors.

**NOISE LEVEL** -- Comfortable, thanks to well-spaced tables, a high ceiling and area rugs.

**SERVICE** -- Cordial and well-trained over all.

**RECOMMENDED DISHES** -- Golden gazpacho, pan-seared foie gras, beef carpaccio, house-smoked salmon, roasted jumbo prawns, baby squid à la plancha, crispy salmon, crispy duck breast, L'Escale bouillabaisse, grilled lamb chop, quince and apple tart, black and white soufflé, semi-sweet chocolate tart.

**PRICE RANGE** -- Lunch entrees: \$12 to \$25; Dinner: appetizers \$7 to \$18; entrees \$17 to \$32; desserts \$7 to \$12.

**CREDIT CARDS** -- All major cards accepted.

**HOURS** -- Lunch: 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. daily; Dinner: 5 p.m.-10 p.m. Sunday through Thursday, 5 p.m.-11 p.m. Friday and Saturday.

**RESERVATIONS** -- Accepted and recommended.

**WHEELCHAIR ACCESSIBILITY** -- Yes; restrooms also.

**Photos (Photographs by Suzy Allman for The New York Times)**

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