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Around the world in just one meal at Karen & Rei's

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Avalon – It didn't take long for us to fall in love with Karen & Rei's. All it took was a whiff as we walked in the door.

The pungent aroma of garlic mingled with a hint of more exotic seasonings – curry and lemongrass, hot peppers and who-knows-what. The eclectic menu spans the globe, from the Pacific Rim to the Caribbean, from Thailand to France. You may find fish you've never heard of before on the specials menu.

The dishes are unusual; the flavors are bold and assertive. And if it's spicy-hot you crave ... we'll talk about the one-to ten scale later.

Chef Karen Nelson and host Rei Prabhakar struck out on their own in Avalon last fall after gaining recognition as the chef and manager of Clyde's Steaks in Somers Point. They toughed out the winter in the resort, apparently getting their act and their menu together. It paid off. We found the place among the best new restaurants we've found recently – and by far the most interesting.

The pair are obviously putting a great deal of time and heart into the place. Consider, for example, the expansive desserts menu containing more than a dozen decadent concoctions, from the frozen chocolate Grand Marnier soufflé to cheesecakes – all homemade.

Fresh breads, warm from the oven

Or consider the fact that we were presented with a breadbasket in which four kinds of bread – all freshly baked that day, we were told – are described in detail by our server. A sourdough so fresh and soft that it is almost gooey. Aromatic herb breadsticks. A loaf of soft white bread (our favorite) studded with big chunks of sun-dried tomatoes and onions. A grainy roll. All were warm. All tasted like they just came out of the oven. Complimenting them was a dish of olive oil and a head of roasted garlic for squeezing.

The restaurant itself is small, about a dozen tables in a long room with a clean, blue and white color scheme. It's unpretentious seashore bistro décor. (One suggestion: Try relocating the distracting computer screen/work station at the end of the room.) There is also an outdoor deck for summer dining.

Rei enthusiastically describes dishes and makes suggestions. One recommendation was the mahogany clam chowder (\$5.50), which is made to order. This silky soup was topped with more than a half dozen tender Maine littlenecks in the shell. It was thick with pieces

of mushrooms and potatoes, and burst with flavors of clams, smoked bacon and thyme. Pieces of fresh spinach, just barely wilted, were nestled under the clamshells. Heaven.

Tomato and mozzarella salad (\$5.50) was surprisingly good, considering Jersey tomatoes are not yet in season. It was made instead with ripe, but not particularly flavorful, plum tomatoes, which alternated with buffalo mozzarella. Red-pepper oil, shredded basil and lots of toasted garlic made up for the lack of Jersey-tomato-flavor—but this dish can only get better (and the seasonings could be toned down) as the summer progresses.

Wild-mushroom won tons (\$6.25) were a half dozen crisp won tons, plumped up with big pieces of dark, woody mushrooms. They were perfectly paired with a raspberry-ginger reduction and crunchy Oriental slaw.

Now, about that heat index. Most of the entrees at Karen & Rei's can be made with a hot-pepper factor that ranges from one to 10; three we were told, was considered spicy hot at normal restaurants. I, a weenie, wimped out. My dining partner asked for a two – and it brought beads of sweat to his forehead. Tip: Err on the side of weenie-ism.

Exotic and unusual fare

From the specials menu, I picked a fish I had never heard of before – hamachi (\$21), a Hawaiian fish described as similar to mahi-mahi, (but I thought a tad stronger). The dish was an artistic triumph: Two thick fingers of the hamachi, pan-seared, were stacked over mashed Yukon Gold potatoes. On one side of the peak was a ragout of toasted garlic, chopped tomatoes, sun-dried tomatoes and wild mushrooms. On the other side, as if creeping up the mound, was a small sautéed soft shell.

The little I could handle of my dining partner's ostrich – a “two” on the heat index – tasted equally exotic and unusual. The ostrich (\$19.95) had been sliced around a bed of basmati rice. It rested on an exotic yellow sauce of curry, lemon grass, ginger and coconut, and was finished with shredded carrots, scallions and basil. Ostrich tastes much like beef, but it is very lean; it should not be overcooked. This came on the rare side of the medium-rare ordered.

From the encyclopedia of desserts, we split a chocolate beggar's purse (\$5.50) – a hot and flaky phyllo dough “purse” that spilled out dense, molten chocolate. It came on a plate striped with chocolate ganache and crème anglaise. It did not, as the menu said, have the “light texture” of a soufflé.

Tip: Make reservations. We predict Karen & Rei's is going to be a hot new place in this “cooler by a mile” resort this year.

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