

Nini's Bistro ★★ New Haven

Nini's Bistro is one of the colorful chips that make up the eclectic mosaic that is New Haven. A storefront café in the Ninth District, with a Chinese restaurant next door, an Indian place on the corner and a Japanese one across the street, it looks and feels like one of those wonderful little mom-and-pop bistros that used to be all over Paris but are now getting hard to find.

Nini's isn't French, but like its Parisian counterparts it's cozy, intimate and a little bit quirky and makes an ooh-la-la cassoulet, not to mention, upon occasion, coquilles St. Jacques. The prix fixe menu, which changes every two weeks, is extensive and includes a sort of flex-pass option: a two-course meal for \$28.95, three courses for \$33.95 or four for \$38.95. The lineup is opulent. Think carpaccio, seared tuna, lemon tart with fig sauce.

We're not talking tapas here. Big dinner plates are filled rim to rim. Appetizers, salads and desserts are large. And the food on your plate is the food you ordered, not leafed out with radish roses and other folderol. Even the carpaccio appetizer met this criterion: Five thin strips of rosy-red seared sirloin at least five inches long were adorned with nothing but a shimmer of white truffle oil and shavings of Parmigiano Reggiano. Excellence doesn't need a rose in its hair.

Pea soup was hearty and filling, not a citified purée but a country potage chunky with smoked ham—a welcome warm-up on a cold winter night. A tomato-and-mozzarella tart was another story. It was hate at first sight—a large, unwieldy wedge of pastry on a bed of greens smeared with brown balsamic vinaigrette. A slice of tomato in the top crust made it dauntingly fork-resistant. Persevering, we were not only pleasantly surprised but won over. The pastry was flaky, luscious streams of melted mozzarella and ricotta oozed out, the balsamic cut the richness. Presentation isn't what bistro food is about but this delicious basil-scented tart deserved better.

An appetizer called "chicken spiedies" rang no bell with me, but the menu helpfully explained that "Spiedies were invented in Binghamton, N.Y., and basically they are meat on a stick marinated overnight with wine, garlic, spices and olive oil." Always up for a new experience, I ordered spiedies, which turned out to be cute little things, like Thai satays—cubes of chicken breast char-grilled and served over thinly sliced cucumber salad—festive bites to begin a meal with.

Nini's salads were slightly more predictable and large enough to share. The house salad of frisky-fresh baby greens, tomato and cucumber came with a warm goat cheese croustade and raspberry dill vinaigrette, which is not

Winning Food Entrepreneurs

By Beth Hillson

Tasting spoon in one hand, pen in the other and taste buds at the ready, I recently joined 27 food aficionados to judge the Connecticut Specialty Food Awards, a taste extravaganza put on by the Connecticut Specialty Food Association every year. Our assignment: Choose the best in a room filled with decadent desserts and toppings, salsas, chutneys, relishes, artisan cookies and tarts, biscotti and teas from 38 Connecticut food entrepreneurs. When we finished, 58 awards were given out in 19 categories of foods and beverages.

After lingering over seconds and thirds, I picked a few winners of my own.

A cup of Harney & Sons Hot Cinnamon Sunset Tea quickly transported me to warmer climes. An assertive blend of black tea, cinnamon, orange and cloves, this blend earned the coveted Product of the Year. In fact, Harney blitzed the beverage category, with Hot Pomegranate Oolong Tea and Hot Bangkok Tea also placing. **Harney & Sons**, based in Lakeville (888/427-6398; harney.com), has been synonymous with great tea since John Harney started the company 25 years ago. Today, three generations work in the family business.

"Attitude for your food" is **Nip 'n Tang's** slogan to describe these otherwise indescribable fruited horseradish sauces from Wittman Specialty Foods in West Hartford (860/231-9420; nipntang.com). Pomegranate Plum walked away with top honors but we can't ignore its siblings—apricot, blueberry, cranberry orange and pineapple. All are fat-, dairy-, gluten-free but definitely not flavor-free. Add zest to meats and chicken or serve over cream cheese with crackers. People claim addiction to Nip 'n Tang. "I can eat an entire jar—just give me a spoon," says owner Brian Wittman, who bought the cottage business for just that reason.

What's another word for decadent? Try **Purple Pear** dessert toppings—French Caramel Cream, Hot Fudge Cream and French Caramel Cream with Pecans swept the category and had the judges fighting for more. The creations of Tina Fearnley of Willington (860/933-1033; thepurplepearbytina.com), these homemade sauces are made with all the right stuff—heavy cream, sugar, vanilla, chocolate. What more do you need, except maybe a pint of homemade vanilla ice cream?

Snickerdoodle Cookies from **Gilbert's Gourmet Goodies**, Sandy Hook (203/733-8217; gilbertsgourmetgoodies.com), took first place in the gluten-free category but could have won any cookie competition. Owner Liz Gilbert has mastered the art of making a soft cookie without regular flour. Her creations (cookies, quick breads and desserts) are all made from the finest natural and organic ingredients and without wheat, gluten, nuts, milk or preservatives. Now that's one smart cookie.

Blaine and Deanna Matthews started creating specialty cakes at their 1812 farmhouse in Cornwall Bridge 27 years ago. Today, in addition to Lemon Rum Sunshine Cake and Blueberry Brunch cake, the mail-order **Matthews 1812 House** (800) 662-1812; matthews-1812house.com) offers cookies, nuts, chocolates and other treats. Their Almond Roll-ups (hand-rolled marzipan-center cookies) took first place in the baked cookie and confection category. The Matthews use top-quality ingredients and offer the personal touches that ensure return customers—they'll even handwrite notes for those sending goodies as gifts.

