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DINING REVIEW

THE PERFECT CAPER

IF YOU CAN FIND IT,
YOU'LL BE GLAD YOU DID

The Perfect Caper is the sort of restaurant I love and hate to write about. It's fun to let foodies know about a terrific out-of-the-way spot. But I run the risk of not getting in there myself.

Still, I'm sharing this one with you because it's simply too wonderful to keep to myself.

The restaurant is on a low-profile side street. In Punta Gorda. And there's no sign out front.

So, here's how to find it: Head into Punta Gorda via U.S. 41. Turn left on Taylor Road, left on West Virginia Avenue and right on Sullivan Street. Look to the right for a peach-colored house. You are there. Make a reservation before going.

Chef/co-owner Jeanie Roland is spectacularly talented, creating imaginative Eurasian cuisine that rivals the best I've had.

The broad-ranging menu features intriguing items such as carpaccio of Kobe beef (with lemon-basil oil, caper oil, aged Parmesan and a fried quail egg). Almost all the vegetables are organic, many coming from nearby Worden Farms. Everything is homemade, and the wine list is exceptional.

We enjoyed excellent California vintages by the glass — a 2000 Sable Ridge Terra Alta syrah and a 2003 Girard petit syrah. The Girard was a big, chewy wine with a deep red hue and notes of plums, berries and grapes with a slight floral touch. The Sable Ridge was a winner, too — lighter in color but full of berries and plums, with a hint of smoke and spice.

A server attendant came to the table with a big basket of fresh focaccia, classic French and whole grain breads.

The evening's amusee was a tasty bite of tuna tartare topped with flying fish caviar on a wonton crisp. It fired up our appetites.

We began with The Perfect Caper Paté and Towers of Ahi. The former was a rectangular slice of creamy paté accompanied by a heavenly Mission fig-Vidalia onion relish, pear chutney, crisps of bread and tangy caper berries. The chutney seemed more like diced pears that had been cooked lightly, but complemented the velvety paté and crunchy crisps nicely.

A delightful departure from the usual presentation, the ahi came in wedges of tuna wrapped in nori and a thin pastry crust flash fried, making the outside crisp but leaving the fish rare and buttery. Vibrant wasabi and spicy pickled ginger added more flavor, and it came with a small mesclun salad lightly dressed with Vidalia-yuzu vinaigrette.

We shared a Worden Farms organic Caesar salad and were glad we did, as a half-portion was

plenty. The romaine was fresh and crisp, the dressing and shredded Parmesan were just assertive enough to be noticeable. A delectable white anchovy finished it off.

Our main courses didn't disappoint, either.

January's Wreck was a pan-seared wreckfish in a light roasted tomato-garlic broth atop mashed potatoes and organic kale. A wreck is a large fish similar to grouper. This excellent fish's delicate flavor paired well with the broth. The potatoes were fine and the tender kale was superb, sweet like spinach.

We also tried one of the evening's specials, a 10-ounce Black Angus filet mignon, accompanied by lightly cooked fennel, white asparagus and carrots. Our server didn't tell us the price when he described the dish, and I didn't think to ask. Had I known it was \$45, I might have ordered something else, but the steak was moist and richly flavored. Accompanying vegetables also were cooked simply and equally delicious.

Dessert seemed like overkill, but we rallied and conquered a perfect butterscotch tartlette in a chocolate cookie crust with dabs of caramel and chocolate sauce topped with real whipped cream.

Atmospherically, the dining room is modern, with royal blue walls adorned with black squares and rectangles in irregular patterns. Small lights resembling blue-hued microphones shine subtly on each of the 11 tables. The room's focal point is the open kitchen.

While there seemed to be plenty of staff in the kitchen, the dining room could have used another server. Although he wasn't brusque exactly, ours seemed in a rush, barely able to stop long enough for us to order or ask a question. Still, courses flowed nicely, and our server attendant refilled our water glasses and promptly removed used dishes.

I don't gush. I've eaten at countless restaurants from here to Hong Kong. Many of those meals were fine but forgettable, with only a rare few that really stand out. Dinner at The Perfect Caper ranks right up there with the best of them.