

Duo has made Trio a winner in many valley food circles

Henry Fenwick • Special to The Desert Sun • May 19, 2010

When Tony Marchese and Mark Van Laanen opened Trio last September, there was an immediate buzz about the place; it was noticeably busy right away and word seems to have been spreading ever since.

Neither of Trio's owners are new to the business. Van Laanen, the executive chef, has spent 25 years in restaurants in Wisconsin. General Manager Tony Marchese has run night clubs in Chicago. Both of them knew Palm Springs and they were sure they could fill a niche here. Their plan was to offer affordable dinners with a cuisine consisting of essentially comfort food, but with a sophisticated spin. They gave an immediate makeover to the space, turning what had been a fairly heavy and dark interior into a light, modern setting with a mid-century vibe. They decided to concentrate on a local clientele, sending out postcards targeting the neighborhood. And they used Facebook to spread the word.

The location turned out to be a good one: they became the fourth player in a rectangle of popular eating places. Cheeky's, across and further south on Palm Canyon, serves breakfast and lunch; Jake's, almost opposite them, offers gourmet take-out, lunch and early dinner in a small, courtyard setting; Copley's, south of them on the west side of the street, has established a reputation for fine dining in a relaxed, sophisticated setting. The owners of each establishment were not only friendly, but helpful. Indeed, at Thanksgiving Juliana Copley strongly urged them to open earlier in the afternoon than they had planned. That way, she pointed out, they would get an extra round of customers. It turned out to be extremely good advice.

Perhaps most importantly of all, the menu has been a hit, ranging from burgers to steak, with popular favorites like a Yankee Pot Roast and a Braised Lamb Shank along the way. There is a good country paté made with pork and veal and green peppercorns. Marchese, who confessed he didn't usually like paté, likes this one — there's no liver in it, he pointed out. Their key lime tart tastes authentic (Van Laanen has spent some useful time in Miami) and the Trio nut torte has a solid richness that makes a great

finale to any meal.

Now they are facing their first summer in the desert, but the prospect isn't frightening them. Van Laanen's experience in Door County, Wis., is a sort of seasonal mirror image of Palm Springs. They have decided to close only for the month of August, since so many of their local customers stay for the summer, too.

Chef Van Laanen has already lightened some of the menu's dishes as the hot weather begins (though that Yankee Pot Roast is much too much of a favorite to be removed). The pasta, for example, includes a titillating Gorgonzola Walnut Ravioli and a Penne with King Crab, Corn, Roasted Red Pepper and Asparagus. The duck now has a pomegranate chili sauce. And he has introduced a Crawfish Pot Pie that testifies to his love of New Orleans cuisine. It is a classic crawfish étouffée with a puff pastry top. Étouffée is a staple of Creole cookery, and the crawfish are smothered in a thick, delicately spicy sauce that soaks deliciously into the light puff pastry.

It will be hard to say goodbye to that one when the summer is over.



Mark Van Laanen and Tony Marchese own Trio in Palm Springs. (Courtesy of Trio)