

dining

GulfCoastingLive.com

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REVIEW

Punta Gorda's The Perfect Caper perfectly divine

When a chef is a semifinalist for a James Beard Foundation Award — two years running — it usually brings a dash of celebrity to the kitchen. Despite the recognition, Jeanie Roland continues cooking away in relative anonymity in Punta Gorda, where she and her husband have had The Perfect Caper for eight years.

Like most chefs worth their salt, Roland spotlights seasonal local ingredients at their peak of flavor, such as the mangoes showcased in the amuse bouche as well as dessert.

It's been a while since we've visited Punta Gorda, but Roland's recent recognition seemed like a good reason to head north. It's only about 25 miles from downtown Fort Myers.

The Perfect Caper is worth the mileage. And although entrees soar from \$18 to \$40, the summer prix fixe menu offers two courses for \$20.

What's priceless is Chef Roland's imaginative mingling of global ingredients, classical techniques and unexpected flavors. Raisins in beurre blanc? Foie gras with grits? Yes, yes.

Shortly after we were seated in the chicly modern dining room we were welcomed with the aforementioned amuse, a shooter of mango gazpacho. It managed to be sweet and savory at the same time, with a warm, buttery richness.

Wine selections by the glass are limited in number but not quality, while bottles showed a good variety



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and values in the \$30 to \$50 range.

We stuck with the glasses, and especially liked the dark fruitiness and complexity of the Saintsbury Carneros Pinot Noir (\$10 a glass).

We settled on appetizers of crispy shrimp and foie gras "fireworks."

The former consisted of two jumbo shrimp wrapped in shredded phyllo and crispy fried. Big prawns can turn out tough, but these were tender and juicy within their crunchy wraps. The avocado relish, very similar to guacamole, seemed ordinary until combined with a bite of shrimp and the orange supremes placed atop the relish. It just goes to show how flavor combinations can change the impression of a dish.

Foie gras? Yes, a bit indulgent, but it's worth splurging now and then — especially at Perfect Caper. Here it was pan-seared, so it had a sort of lacquered, caramelized veneer. Inside, it was unbelievably creamy and melted on the tongue. We loved the irony of pairing it with grits (as well as huckleberry sauce).

Entrees revealed Roland's strong foundation in classical technique — with a soupcon of creativity.

The pan-seared flounder fillet was beautifully bronzed yet moist and flaking within. A pool of lemony beurre blanc dotted with golden raisins, capers and pine nuts offered a note of acidity to balance the natural sweetness of the fish.

The fillet was perched atop a bed of *pommes Dauphinoise*, a classic French comfort dish of thinly sliced potatoes that are simmered in cream then baked in cream and Gruyere. Just heavenly — I even loved the chewy-crusty brown bottom.

The rack of lamb, too, was perfectly cooked. A dried porcini rub produced a pleasing crust, while the meat remained red, juicy, tender. It was served with a melange of roasted fennel, fingerling potatoes, garlic cloves, mushrooms and asparagus.

Dessert was a warm mango tart that brought out the honey notes in the fruit and was paired with house-made mango ice cream. Mmm.

Throughout dinner, our server was inobtrusive, efficient and well-versed in the menu. He even remembered my guest from a previous visit.

If there's any justice, Chef Roland will win one of those Beard awards one of these years.

— Jean Le Boeuf is the *nom de plume* of a local food lover who dines at The News-Press' expense. Send comments to jleboeuf@news-press.com.

THE PERFECT CAPER

Food: ★★★★★ | Atmosphere: ★★★½ | Service: ★★★★★

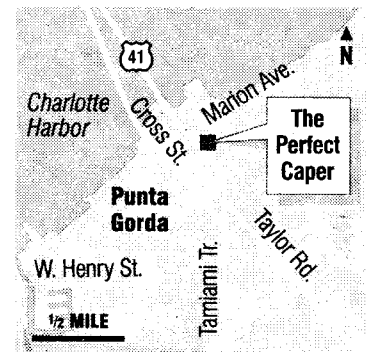
121 E. Marion Ave., Punta Gorda

IF YOU GO

Price: \$\$\$\$-\$\$\$\$\$
Hours: Lunch 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Thursday and Friday, dinner 4-9 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday and 4-10 p.m. Friday and Saturday.
Call: 941-505-9009

Noise level: Moderate to high

Etc.: Reservations recommended; the menu changes monthly.
Web site: theprecapercaper.com



THE NEWS-PRESS

SAMPLE OF-THE MENU

APPETIZERS & SALADS

Crispy prawns, \$13
 Sweet and spicy calamari, \$10
 Steamed Prince Edward Island mussels, \$9
 Foie gras fireworks, \$16
 Salad of goat cheese, roasted beets, avocado, peas, chevre dressing, watercress and arugula, \$11

ENTREES

Crispy confit of duck and marinated duck breast, Pan-seared crab cake, \$26
 Steamed udon noodles with baby bok choy, wild mushrooms and hoisin-lemongrass broth, \$18
 Buttermilk soaked chicken breast with blue corn grits, \$25