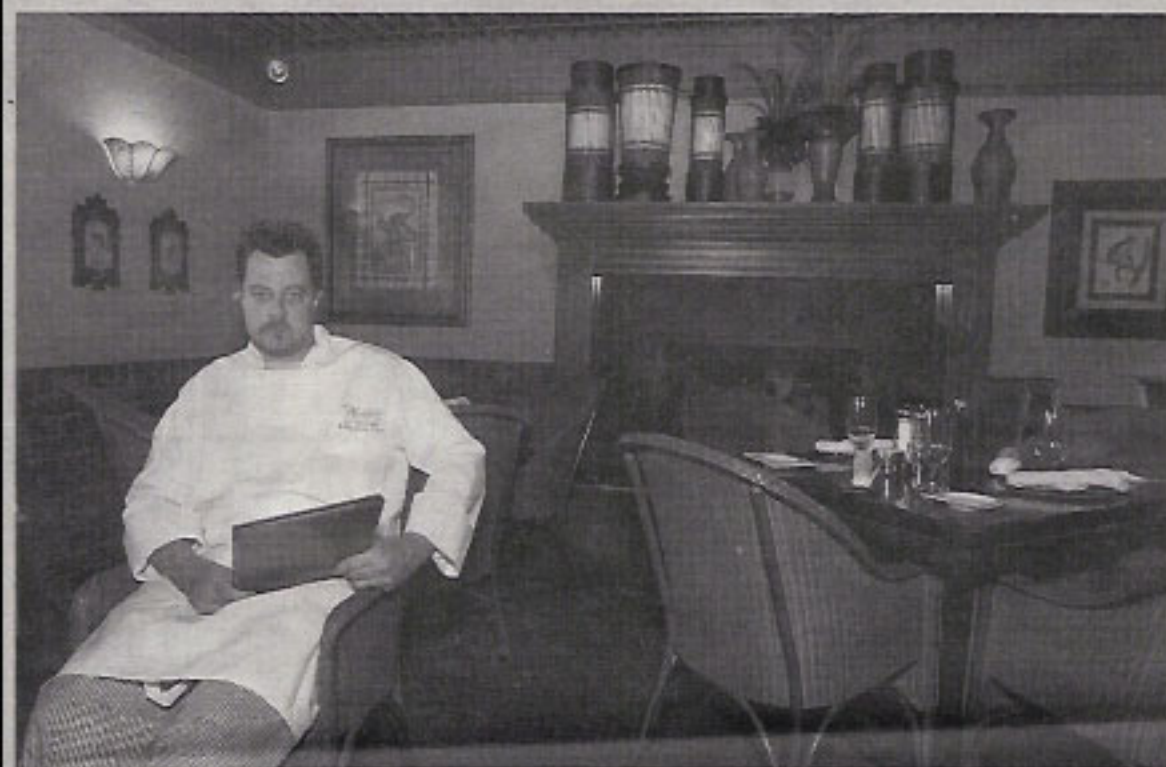


DINNER AT EIGHT

Vanesko's Plantation Not Your Typical Shore Restaurant



Ryan Morrill

HANDS ON AND HEALTHY: Chef Allan Vanesko of Plantation in Harvey Cedars promises a menu that is tasty and healthy.

By MARK HOWAT

Expect the unexpected at Plantation, Long Beach Island's newest chi-chi restaurant. Located in Harvey Cedars, it occupies the site on the Boulevard where The Owl Tree for years existed.

Executive Chef Allan Vanesko says he does not want to operate the typical shore restaurant. For example, he says you won't find clams or any customary shore offerings at his 180-seat restaurant.

The unexpected may be a soup: coconut crab and corn chowder with corn fritter; or one of the cold, summer soups — most likely a fruit soup, not too sweet, with ginger or coconut or white wine. Or it may be glazed chicken wings, not the barbecued buffalo wings found everywhere. Here the wings are marinated for days in honey, soy sauce, ginger, garlic and green onions and are cooked till they take on a rich, dark mahogany color. Hence the menu offering, mahogany

wings.

"They have a definite Asian influence," says Vanesko.

"My food will be different, good, and beautiful. Overall, most people will enjoy the experience."

"There are a lot of average-to-good restaurants, but we hope to rise above the standard. I think we have a chic look, and we have a menu that has Caribbean and Southern influences."

"We'll be serving breakfast, lunch, and dinner. And during the peak months of July and August, we expect to do 500 to 600 dinners a night."

Vanesko says his restaurant philosophy is blue-collar, hands-on. "I'm no prima donna. I'll get right in there and do the dishes. I set the example."

Consistency, he says, is the key to operating a successful restaurant. "A restaurant is customer-driven. You have to serve good meals at reasonable prices, and you have to do that over a period of time."

Service and atmosphere are all equally important, he adds.

"All the wait staff are learning the menu so they can explain each dish to every customer."

One thing that annoys Vanesko is the customer who wants to redesign the menu. "You design a menu the way you want. You match the items that go well together on the plate and then the customer wants to alter your idea. It's upsetting, but you do it because you have to accommodate the customer. The good customer is the one who appreciates what you are doing, who knows what it's all about, and comes back week after week. The repeat customer is a good customer."

"Our menu," he says, "is designed with today's customer in mind. That customer is more health-conscious than one 10 years ago. Today we use less cream and butter. Dishes are more simple but they always have the three main ingredients: a starch, a vegetable and meat."

"We do not plan for vegetarians, though. If someone asks for a vegetarian dinner, we'll do our best to satisfy them. We can al-

ways put together a vegetarian dish."

Vanesko is not new to the business. For a quarter of a century, he has been working in and overseeing restaurants. He is right now corporate chef of four restaurants and operates a retail store. Just this month, he opened the restaurant *Moshulu*, a 100-year-old, four-masted windjammer moored at Penns Landing in Philadelphia (worth a visit for the ship alone). But it is Plantation that currently occupies his time. He is here for the long-term, will be open year-round, and is committed to Plantation, he says.

Although he has spent much of his life in the restaurant business, he didn't start out there. He was an electrician in a shipyard but was laid off. He enjoyed cooking, so he decided to go to the Restaurant School in Philadelphia, the source of some of the finest chefs on the East Coast. He met his wife in the business. They were working at different restaurants and met at a Super Bowl party for restaurant people. "I fell in love the first day," he says.

What does Chef Vanesko like to prepare most? "*Foie gras*," he answers at once. "But it's too pricey to put on a shore menu. We want to cater to families here." Well, that's an hors d'oeuvre; what does he like to prepare most as an entrée?

"Sweetbreads," he responds. "But that's different and you won't see it here, either."

What, then, is this chef's favorite meal?

"Pizza. I love pizza, any kind, all the time."

So much for gourmet dishes.

Disasters in the kitchen? "There was a time when someone was opening a bottle of champagne and the cork came out like a bullet, smashed a chandelier and showered glass over 50 soups. But real disasters are very rare."

So settle in for some offbeat Plantation entrées: cider-barbecued free-range chicken; wasabi-crusted Chilean sea bass; jerk-rubbed pork chops; or maybe the shellfish risotto with sun-dried tomatoes, sweet corn, smoked bacon, parsley, and parmesan crisp! ■

Mark Howat, a former senior editor with The Bergen Record of Hackensack, enjoys his retirement years sampling fine dining on Long Beach Island. He lives in Surf City.