

CONRAD`S PAIRS SERVICE WITH ADVENTUROUS DISHES, August 21, 1987

The new Conrad`s in Boca Raton is not the easiest restaurant to notice, but it is surely not hard to find. It`s on the northeastern corner of Palmetto Park Road and Federal Highway, across from what I`m sure owner Steve Gerson hopes some day soon will be the much-discussed Barbar Center.

Gerson, with his upscale, elegantly understated 55-seat cafe, trendy enough to have the chefs on partial view through a trio of windows, obviously is thinking of the center and the crowds it will bring, and the parking places it will have at night.

Parking currently only appears to be a problem. There`s plenty of room in the vacant lot across the street, and in the back, there`s room for enough cars to bring a sufficient number of diners in to keep the place alive. Until that time, Gerson and his pleasant, talented crew, can perfect their craft, honing the finer points of service, mastering all aspects of an operation that certainly has enough promise to become absolutely outstanding.

That menu is a refreshingly straightforward one, with each of the four sections of sustenance similarly priced. That means the eight appetizers are each \$6.50, the trio of salads \$3.50, a like number of pastas \$1 more, and the eight entrees \$18.50. It`s an interesting approach, not one that I recall seeing before, although it`s not unlike a fixed price bill of fare, one in which the dinner can have a choice of items at various set prices.

There are some real zingers on the menu, including the kind of starters we`ve come to expect these days in places with display kitchens -- thick, bratwurst- size sausages made with salmon, grilled then served with a caper-freckled brown butter sauce; fresh foie gras dusted with pistachio flour and seared slightly before serving; fresh tuna marinated seviche style in a lime vinaigrette; smoked pheasant presented with a few dollops of chutney made with ginger and pear; steak tartare crowned with caviar; and two of our selections, a minirack of lamb with garlic and rosemary, and escargot strudel. The snails were mixed with roasted garlic, sun-dried tomatoes, feta cheese and dandelion greens. Can you imagine telling someone 10 years ago that you ate that in a Boca Raton restaurant?

The only surprise among the three salads, including a fine Caesar`s (which was one of our choices), and another made with buffalo mozzarella and thick slices of beefsteak tomatoes poised on a vinaigrette made with sun-dried tomatoes (which we also selected and raved about), was the grilled quail on a variety of fresh greenery with a blueberry vinaigrette.

Three of the entrees are from the Plains -- the tenderloins of prime veal and Black Angus beef, and the New York strip steak, each of them given its own innovative thoroughly different sauce and staging -- four from the sea and one from the sky, the duck breast. To the uninitiated of modern nouvelle niceties, that duck might look like something completely different. The boned meat is rolled into apricot- and avocado-stuffed tubular shapes, sliced and served in a circle around the excellent rice and vegetables. And it`s strictly guaranteed to be a fresh duck, flown in from Indiana we were told. For the less-adventurous in spirit, the duck also is grilled whole and served with an apricot-sesame dotted sauce. The swordfish steak was easy to understand, marinated and grilled as it was. The lobster lasagna with its overtones of squid ink, goat cheese, saffron, herbs, not to mention spinach and both red and yellow marinara sauces was a bit busy. But our desserts, especially the blueberry-raspberry whipped-cream phyllo surprise, were excellent, the presentation -- as it was throughout the meal -- sensational.

And the wine list, already a good one, is bound to improve in depth as that immediate area of downtown catches up with the uptown, upscale Conrad`s.