

eat & drink

EDITED BY ERIC LEVIN



REVIEW JUNIPER HILL • CLINTON

Simplicity Runs Deep

After a peripatetic career, chef Josh DeChellis has come home to Jersey's wealthiest county to turn a former bank into a showcase of fresh, contemporary cooking for all. *By Fran Schumer*



FOOD New American

AMBIENCE Elegant room in which cutoffs are just fine

SERVICE Sometimes overburdened

DRINKS Full bar, including five remarkably good draft wines, plus bottle list

PRICES Appetizers and salads, \$10-\$16; entrées, \$19-\$43; desserts, \$7-\$8

OPEN Dinner, Tuesday-Sunday &

→ 73 Beaver Avenue, 908-335-8905; juniper-hill.com

Hunterdon, New Jersey's wealthiest county by per capita income, is also, according to a *Forbes* ranking this year, the ninth richest county in America. That conjures a *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* image that doesn't reflect the reality that chef Josh DeChellis and his wife, Jennifer, friends since high school, grew up with.

"When you quantify it, Hunterdon looks really rich," DeChellis acknowledges. "There's no bad side of the tracks, but in reality, it's the quintessential cross section of middle-class America."

In fact, DeChellis, 44, sees his home county as underserved, at least in one respect. That is why he and Jennifer went all in to buy a liquor license and convert a former PNC bank branch in the Annandale section of Clinton into Juniper Hill, their New American restaurant that sits at the base of a

hill where juniper trees rise.

"The demographics are getting younger; people know what good food is from reading magazines and watching TV, but there's nowhere to get it here," he explains. "So I'm trying to get good, clean food on the table as inexpensively as possible, get rid of all the ceremony of fine dining, and have people feel it's just an extension of the community."

A crudo of wild salmon from the Yukon, one of several excellent starters, exemplifies DeChellis's approach to cooking, which might be called simplicity with depth. The silky flesh is crowned with a vibrant foam whipped up from soy protein and coconut water infused with lemongrass, cilantro, lime zest and gingery galangal. For contrast, DeChellis adds dots of a paste he makes from chilies, vinegar and Colatura di Alici, a cherished Sicilian fish sauce.

PHOTOGRAPHS: PAUL BARTHOLONIEW

That same forceful fish sauce, which DeChellis first encountered at Il Buco Alimentari in Manhattan, where he was executive chef before opening Juniper Hill in April, combines with Thai basil, lime, cherry tomatoes, cukes and bean sprouts to make a wood-grilled wild-shrimp appetizer memorable.

Your eyes might skim past the first item on the menu; Caesar salads can be ordinary. But the “salad of local romaine hearts, watermelon radish, lemon-anchovy vinaigrette” transcends type. The anchovy dressing, rich with the flavors of olives and lemon, has a subtle pungency that combines with the contrasting textures of the radishes and prosciutto to make this a splendid dish.

DeChellis and his sous chef, Meg Loos, formerly of Hamilton’s Grill Room in Lambertville, roll out winning entrées, too. A peppery salt rub imbues the seared-tuna entrée with a flavor even the best hardwood charcoal (here mostly oak) cannot produce. The other key elements in the rub are hot Indian long peppers and crushed juniper berries, beloved by the chef for their foresty, wintergreen scent.

DeChellis, born in Bogotá, Colombia, was adopted as an infant by an American couple who raised him in Clinton.

“My mom was an amazing, caring, loving woman, but an absolutely terrible cook,” he says. Childhood suppers included a “Campbell’s-inspired pot roast” and chicken marinated in a “powdered Italian-dressing sauce.”

In high school, he got a job washing dishes in an Italian restaurant. Sauté pans fresh from the stove would pile up in front of him. Using crusts of bread, he’d mop up and devour whatever was left in them. “I was able to taste real pomodoro, Alfredo cream sauce with fresh nutmeg, braised squid and tomatoes, and the fresh, sage-perfumed veal sauce in saltimbocca,” he says. “My mind was blown; I’d never tasted food like that.”

After graduating from the CIA in 1994, DeChellis apprenticed at several Michelin three-star restaurants, including Lucas Carton and Arpège in Paris. The next two decades—centered in New York at places such as Union Pacific, Jovia, Niko, Barfry, a new incarnation of La Fonda Del Sol, and Sumile, a sushi place

in which he was a partner—included stints at Wolfgang Puck’s Postrio in San Francisco and trips to Japan.

In Japan, DeChellis was especially struck by the meticulousness and reverence of the chefs. “When we talk about chicken here, we talk about neck, thigh, wing and breast,” he says. “In Japan, they speak about its 39 pieces and treat each one differently. We *care* about ingredients; they *worship* them.” “Japan,” he adds, “taught me so much, and my biggest takeaway was restraint.”

A perfect example is Juniper Hill’s ricotta on grilled sesame sourdough from its bar menu. The ricotta, handmade by Lioni Latticini in Union, is soft and rich, with a large curd. The great bread is from the Wayfare Baker in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. DeChellis sprinkles the ricotta with Thai chilies, a fruity Italian olive oil and sea salt. The chili heat and sparks of salt hauntingly enhance the comforting ricotta, bread and oil.

DeChellis is almost fanatically passionate about fish. “I use six different fish people, and I talk to them every day to get what’s running,” he says. “Sometimes it’s too fresh and still in rigor mortis, and I have to wait to cut it. It’s a great problem to have.”

From Point Pleasant he gets skate, monkfish and rascasse, a local species of the essential fish in French soupe de poisson. From Montauk he gets spade fish, which have a high fat content “like swordfish, so it’s great on the grill,” he says. The spade fillets in Juniper Hill’s fish tacos are juicy enough to wolf down on their own, but the smear of avocado and crunchy kale slaw add to the pleasure. Blistering the tortillas over oak charcoal imparts a deliciously smoky edge.

Vegetable curry is rich with coconut, but not overwhelmed by it. The highlight is the koshihikari rice, a type of premium sticky rice DeChellis encountered in Japan. Especially sweet and plump, it



BANK ON IT Opposite page: skewered, grilled shrimp with tomato and cucumber salad. This page, from above left: co-owners Josh DeChellis, the chef, and his wife, Jennifer, who designed the interior; romaine salad with lemon-anchovy dressing; grilled half chicken with roasted, spiced heirloom baby carrots, greek yogurt, mint and lime.



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soaks up the mild sauce and flavorful juices of carrots, purple cauliflower and other vegetables.

Grilled chicken from Giannone, a well-known Canadian producer, has a complex, gamy flavor that blossoms in the company of the dish's Castelvetro olives, yellow peppers, watermelon radishes and crunchy cubes of toasted sourdough spritzed with brine from pepperoncini peppers.

A few things fell short. A six-minute egg did little to enhance an undercooked local-asparagus appetizer blizzarded with Parmesan. A similar egg added nothing to a moist and flavorful flat iron steak. Servers seemed overextended on busy nights; it took effort to get their attention for water, silverware and the check.

Of greater concern was the absence of any spectacular desserts. The simplest was berries that DeChellis had picked himself in nearby Pittstown and served with vanilla-speckled whipped cream.

Even with those caveats, Juniper Hill opens a promising new chapter in a substantial career. For DeChellis and his wife, the homecoming begins with family—Jennifer's father, Larry Weinschenk, for example, stained and sanded the dining room tables out of wood from an old dairy barn, to stunning effect—and reaches outward.

"We're not preaching to the community," says DeChellis. "We want the restaurant to integrate with them." The object, he says, "is to make them smile." 🍴



SPACIOUS

Clockwise from above: the dining room in the former PNC bank branch; crudo of wild Alaskan sockeye salmon with chilled lemongrass broth, chili paste and cilantro; grilled fish tacos with avocado, pineapple, summer slaw and lime.



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★★★★★ Extraordinary ★★★★★ Excellent ★★★★★ Very Good ★★★★★ Good ★★★★★ Fair

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