

EAT

L'ESCALE



Herb crusted spring rack of lamb with minted English pea pureé • L'escale, translated to "port of call," welcomes visitors with authentic Provençal charm

BY MARY KATE HOGAN • PHOTOGRAPHS BY JULIE BIDWELL

Refresher *Course*

Catching up on the latest at l'escale. The next best thing to savoring springtime in Paris

When you're living in New England, embracing the change of seasons becomes part of your DNA. Chefs may relish the arrival of spring even more than most of us, as they have the chance to update their menus and get creative with the young, tender vegetables and other seasonal ingredients, perhaps tweaking signature dishes to incorporate all that's new. For those of us dining out, the season can be an opportunity to experience something fresh at our favorite restaurants.

"Spring means fresh English peas, fresh fava beans, ramps, and I particularly like fiddlehead ferns," says l'escale's executive chef, Frederic Kieffer, who also oversees the Artisan restaurants in Southport, Newfane, Vermont (at The Four Columns Inn), and soon-to-open West Hartford. Chef Frederic works closely with local farms to bring these ingredients and more to his menu of Mediterranean cuisine at



Crudo: escolar with orange wedges and passion fruit sauce; tuna and avocado with soy-sesame sauce; salmon shishito with radishes and citrus-pepper sauce

l'escale, where there's an emphasis on seafood. The classically trained French chef grew up in the countryside of France. And the restaurant captures the essence of Cote d'Azur, both in the atmosphere—from the elegant Provencal-inspired dining room to the expansive waterfront terrace overlooking Greenwich Harbor—and through the food.

Crudo is almost always on the menu, but Chef Frederic and his team prepare the dish differently depending on the season. Moving into spring, the crudo plate often centers around locally sourced Stonington sea scallops. At a recent tasting dinner, the cool, tender scallops were paired with blood orange sections, slices of shishito pepper, with its seeds adding a bit of texture, and a light tomato-water dressing. The dish is plated with cilantro, fleur de sal and edible flowers, a colorful combination that's a feast for the eyes, too. The hint of citrus adds brightness and brings out the flavor of the raw scallops in this must-try starter.

Another first course that gets a fresh twist in the spring is the imported burrata. While the classic burrata complement is prosciutto, here the chef pairs the lush imported cheese with smoked salmon, artichoke and avocado that's grilled as well as pickled strawberries, the smokiness of the salmon and grilled vegetables playing up the taste of the burrata. Certain standards are always on l'escale's menu, such as the popular and indulgent Bouillabaisse Provencale and for vegetable-lovers, the Georgette's Salad with kale, frisee, quinoa, blueberries, pumpkin seeds, avocado and more, named and created especially for Georgette Mallory, the wife of The Delamar's owner, Charles.

With the focus on organic and healthy eating, entrées at l'escale are never heavy, but one that's especially light, delicious and laden with fresh vegetables is the salmon. (Seafood sourcing is so important these days, and this is organic salmon from the Faroe Islands that's fed from a natural stream of shrimp and calamari, a sustainable alternative to wild salmon.) The salmon



Imported burrata with smoked salmon, grilled avocado and artichokes in a "mache green" moscatel glaze • (below) Angus beef carpaccio with straciatella di bufala, melon and roquette arugula





Faroe Island salmon in a verjus glaze with lemon, asparagus and artichoke risotto • (below)
Florida Strawberry Shortcake with vanilla chantilly • Dame Blanche

in a fish veloute sauce is served on a bed of asparagus with wilted choy and topped with asparagus slaw and a dollop of American caviar, a delicate melange of flavors.

On the sweeter side of things, Pastry Chef Wendy Laurent, a Greenwich native who was once the pastry chef at Gotham Bar & Grill in New York, has a way with seasonal ingredients, too. “I can’t wait for spring and all of the fresh, sweet fruits,” says Chef Wendy. “I always reintroduce the classic peach melba,” she says of this luscious dessert that she prepares with peaches poached in a spiced white wine and served over homemade vanilla ice cream with freshly puréed raspberries and candied almonds. One of Wendy’s specialties that’s a menu staple sure to win over any choco-holic is called Dame Blanche, a warm brownie, ice cream, chocolate sauce and crunchy candied almonds layered into a tall sundae glass. If caramel sauce is more your speed, don’t miss her velvety bread pudding or Bananas Foster, as both are topped with homemade vanilla ice cream and the most decadent hot bourbon caramel.

As the weather gets warmer, an equally fun ending to a meal here may involve sitting outside on the terrace and enjoying a film-noir-inspired cocktail—Dr. Strangelove or Notorious anyone?—or a glass of wine (see page 64 or be sure to ask Sommelier John Freitas for his picks).



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In Vino Veritas

Don't know a Brunello from a Barolo? No worries, John Freitas is your guy

Do you tend to order the same kind of wine and familiar labels every time you eat out? John Freitas, the sommelier at l'escale, might just change that. *Wine Spectator* recognized l'escale with its award of excellence, and John is passionate about introducing people to new vintages, lesser-known regions and also helping them find great values. "The fun part is educating people. It's such a pleasure when people ask me to pair the wine with their food," says John, who grew up in an Italian family in Brazil and originally came to the United States for school and to play soccer, but quickly developed a love of wine while working in restaurants. He learned the business over the years working for the Marc Restaurant Group in New York and Greenwich and also by traveling around France, Italy, Germany, Oregon, California and many other wine-producing regions to meet with wine makers. He has completed multiple levels of courses in his quest for the designation of Master Sommelier (there are only a couple of hundred in the world).

Since joining l'escale in 2014, John's been bringing diversity to the wine list, noting "I don't see l'escale just being French at all, especially the wine program. I try to match the kitchen, the chef and, most important, what the customers like," he says. Chef Frederic notes that John has an amazing knack for knowing the guests, studying their palates and remembering what they like while also inviting them to sample something new. "We change the wine list and print a new list almost every day, especially in the summer," says John, who does multiple tastings each week in search of great new wines. "It's fun to work in a place where you can do that."

Wine preferences are very personal, of course, and the options are vast, but we asked John to share suggestions for lesser-known bottles and terrific values. Here are a few of his recommendations for broadening your wine horizons:



Sommelier John Freitas

BAROLOS

If you love Italian reds like Barolos, Brunellos and Barbarescos, **try Aglianico, a wine from the Campania region of southern Italy.** "It's a monster, a full-bodied wine from a grape called Aglianico. It grows around Mount Vesuvius. It's gorgeous and the price is so low compared to the big Bs."

BURGUNDY

If you love wines from Burgundy, look to the smaller villages. John likes **Santenay in the south for reds and Saint Alvin for whites.** "Saint Alvin, which is in the middle of the two Montrachets, is like the poor cousin that nobody talks about. We sell it for about \$80 and The Puligny Montrachet is like \$200. To be honest with you, I think the Saint Alvin is better. It's also comparable to Chassagne Montrachet."

CABERNETS

If you love full-bodied Napa cabernets, look for wines from places like **Alexander Valley in Sonoma, and Santa Maria Valley in Santa Barbara, and also Washington State**, which is the second-largest producer of wines in the United States and very much up-and-coming. "The quality in Washington State is amazing with the cabernets and merlots especially, which we call Bordeaux varietals. We now have four Washington wines on our list." ☑

