The Boston Globe

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CALENDAR

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DINING

ALISON ARNETT

It's show time at Mistral, the hottest ticket in town

IT'S NO WONDER THAT MISTRAL is the hottest spot in Boston right now. Restaurants are this era's answer to theater, to entertainment, to glorification of culture. Mistral hits on all cylinders.

Nothing is hidden about Mistral – it's all apparent when one walks in and is met by the first black-clad host. (Everyone wears black here.) The ultimate point is eating dinner, of course, but that's only part of the show.

There's theater in the sweep of the room, with its high ceilings, grand arched windows, stone floors, and gauzy draperies. Provence, the "in" region of the moment, is the theme of the restaurant designed by Celeste Cooper, and its colors are muted tones of taupes, browns, and a particularly attractive sage green; the oversized banquettes are covered in a glorious print, and the wicker chairs in the front bistro section are painted a chic green, and are comfortable.

The place is a stage, but a tasteful one. The wait staff, competent and for the most part attentive, is also plentiful, and there is much bustle in the room, with staff members striding to and fro.

Entertainment – well, there's no need for a band. (With the high ceilings and hard surfaces, the place is so noisy that conversation, let alone music, is impossible anyway.) In our celebrity-drenched society, one can spend quite a bit of time trying to puzzle out if any stars are among those assembled (you know you've seen photos of many of those at the bar, but can't quite place the names). Besides that, everyone looks great, with an abundance of young women in slinky black.

But the drama is really in the details. We're sanctified the home arts (jokes about Martha Stewart notwithstanding), and what with the faience water pitchers, dark green dessert plates, cheesecloth curtains, menu covers in gray burlap, rough-hewn cabinets sparely decorated with objets d'art, ceramic dinnerware of many different patterns, one can almost hear the sighs as one after another well-dressed diner notices another perfect design note.

Alison Arnett is the Globe's restaurant critic.

MISTRAL

★★★

WHERE: 221 Columbus Ave.
TELEPHONE: 867-9300
PRICES: Appetizers, salads: $7-$18; entrees: $15-$30; desserts: $7.
GOOD CHOICES: Grilled portobello mushroom carpaccio with roasted peppers agrodolce; thin-crust pizza; gazpacho Andaluz; roast tenderloin of veal, soft gorgonzola polenta; tagine of curry-roasted vegetables with pomegranate; herb-roasted chicken; creme brulee; nectarine tart; chocolate pot de creme.
HOURS: Dinner nightly, 5:30-10:30 p.m.; Friday-Saturday, until 11 p.m. in bistro. Reservations accepted. Smoking at bar; cigar smoking in front lounge area.
CREDIT CARDS: All major cards.
ACCESS: Fully accessible.

★★★★ EXTRAORDINARY
★★★ EXCELLENT
★★ VERY GOOD
★ GOOD
FAIR

RATINGS REFLECT THE RESTAURANT CRITIC'S JUDGMENT OF THE FOOD, SERVICE AND ATMOSPHERE IN RELATION TO THE PRICE, BASED ON SEVERAL ANONYMOUS VISITS.

The food, oh, yes the food, the reason for Mistral being a restaurant rather than a nightclub, like co-owner Seth Greenberg's other places. Chef and co-owner Jamie Mammano, who was formerly chef at Aujourd'hui in the Four Seasons, has created a menu that stresses simplicity. It's a smart move: Rather than try to outdo what he, Greenberg and third co-owner, Paul Rolff, have wrought in atmospherics, he carefully complements it.

There's nothing too intricate about either the tastes or the presentation of the food; it's straightforward and plentiful rather than precious. The wine list offers plenty to choose from, with a range of prices.

In a telephone interview, Mammano says "We'll walk and then we'll run." He is striving for consistency, especially in the beginning months of this already packed restaurant.

Herb-roasted chicken shows the benefits of this approach. The

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half chicken, both white and dark meat, is piled on the plate with a warm spinach and bacon salad; the chicken is succulent and moist, and so full of flavor that one marvels that it's just a chicken. All the pieces of the dish fall in place to showcase the meat; nothing is contrived, and it's delicious.

Many of the best dishes run along similar lines. The bravely named "summer's best tomato" with mozzarella manages to fit the bill. The thick slices of tomato and cheese are filling, and the taste with just a bit of vinegar, oil, and basil reminds one of the fleeting last rays of summer. Earlier in the summer, Washington State oysters had the same clarity of purpose, their briny edge bouncing against a bracingly cold burst of vodka-laced cranberry granite.

Mammano carries on the difference in textures and temperatures in his late-summer menu with an excellent gazpacho, all sharp, bright flavors, topped with cucumber granite. The soup is slightly chunky, and there's something surprising yet pleasing in the effect on one's tongue of the mild, icy granite against the acidic tomatoey gazpacho.

Mammano grills portobellos, shaved very thin, and calls them carpaccio, then bathes them in a nicely balanced agrodolce sauce. So many times, the increasingly popular Italian sweet-and-sour treatment leans too heavily to the sweet, but it's fine here and gives the mushrooms and roasted peppers just the right kick.

Thin-crust pizza is just that, almost as thin as cracker bread, wonderful in flavor and texture. An unusual topping of salty shaved ham and fontina sparked with tiny coddled quail eggs was brilliant, I thought, although Mammano said the version didn't sell well.

Comfort food is also stressed. Roast tenderloin of veal was a fine cut of meat, but the pillow of polenta with heady lashings of gorgonzola and a hint of truffle oil was the memorable element. A tagine of curried roasted vegetables started out tasting mild and soothing, and ended with a spicy heat from the curry and a jolt of tart sweetness from pomegranate syrup. It's a great vegetarian dish because of its range of flavors; one can feel adventurous and virtuous all at the same time.

However, some instances left one hungering for a little more fireworks on the plate. A roast bass with oregano and lemon was nice, but needed at least more salt to be tasty. Skillet-fried soft-shell crabs with bacon and scallion mashed potatoes were tepid in flavor, a little limp in textures.

The current craze to whip potatoes into an almost runny paste seems totally misguided to me. This is especially apparent when those mashed potatoes were floating in a succotash of corn and lobster under pan-roasted salmon. There was plenty of both fish and shellfish but the elements had no discernible relationship. And thoroughly soaked mashed potatoes didn't add to the success of the dish.

The best desserts were also the simplest, homey concoctions of berries and a light lemon curd mousse, creamy creme brulee, and an almost ethereal version of bittersweet and milk chocolate pot de creme. A nectarine tart sported a particularly good flaky crust, and a parfait of almond crunch and vanilla ice cream was especially good.

However, the emphasis on ice cream sometimes backfired, as in an ice cream sandwich. The chocolate cookie layers were just right but the ice cream was crystallized and icy, as though it had had too many trips in and out of a freezer.

This is a large restaurant with 190 seats. It has been divided into a bistro section and the more luxurious restaurant seating. However, I saw no one eating the more modest menu of grilled cheese sandwiches and burgers, although that may be more popular later in the evening when a younger crowd comes in.

And because there's been such a rush on reservations, the full menu is served throughout the restaurant and plans for lunch have been shelved for now.

Mistral is definitely the blockbuster hit in town, and for now the theater almost overwhelms the restaurant part of the show. The script is there, though; it will be fun to see its long-run potential.