

Homegrown cooking at J's Restaurant

By E.T. Robbins / News Correspondent

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Nearly a decade ago, Rich Pelletier was interested in buying the rustic farmhouse that is now J's Restaurant at Nashoba Valley Winery in Bolton.

Instead, Pelletier fell in love with the whole package: the sprawling orchard and the winery. Suddenly, career and life changes were imminent. Pelletier became owner of the winery in 1995. He converted the farmhouse into an eatery and opened J's Restaurant in July of 1997.

Today, J's overlooks the orchard, winery and new wedding pavilion, making it one of the loveliest spots on Pelletier's 52 acres.

Executive Chef Steven Sprague has been with J's for almost six years. His philosophy is simple: constant change.

"We try to emphasize seasonal foods with seasonal menus, so there's where the change comes in," Sprague said. We have a great advantage here in that we can use our own products...especially herbs in the herb gardens. We're growing a lot of our own produce...apples, peaches and berries. We can incorporate all that stuff onto the menu when it comes in season."

Sprague said he draws inspiration from his own experiments as well as recommendations from his staff and customers.

"Lately I've been trying to generate more ideas from the dining room," Sprague said.

Some of the highlights of the spring dinner menu include appetizers of sweet chili crab cakes with wasabi-chevre ragoon and micro-brewed soy sauce (\$12) and five-onion vegetarian soup flavored with peach wine, roasted garlic, garden herbs, and a Gruyere crostini (\$6).

For an entree, Sprague suggests the loin of rabbit wrapped in applewood-smoked bacon and served with duchesse potatoes, orchard lettuces and raspberry wine jus lie (\$28). Or you can opt for East Coast halibut broiled in peach wine with vanilla-basil butter sauce and served with sauteed exotic mushrooms and egg noodles (\$27).

Sprague also manages the cuisine for weddings that take place on the winery's grounds. While receptions traditionally have been held in the restaurant, this year is the debut of the new wedding pavilion, a permanent covered structure behind J's. The pavilion can be set for casual or formal receptions and can hold a maximum of 200 people.

Sprague is looking forward to the summer. "Summer's exciting because we incorporate a little bit of tropical flair on the menu, which is something that doesn't happen a lot around here in this area," Sprague said.

As for a sneak peek of the summer menu at J's? Sprague offers one mouth-watering teaser.

"Pan roasted lobster...I tried that for a cooking demonstration a few weeks ago, and it went over pretty well," Sprague said, while adding that he'll couple it with a watermelon salad.

The summer menu goes into effect July 9.

The essentials:

J's Restaurant at Nashoba Valley Winery is located at the winery, 100 Wattaquadoc Road, Bolton. The restaurant is open for lunch 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday; for dinner 6 to 9 p.m. Wednesday to Saturday; and 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. for Sunday brunch. Reservations are strongly recommended. Call 978-779-9816, or go to www.nashobawinery.com for more information.