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FOOD



REVISITING A CLASSIC

As spruced-up Clio turns 15, its reputation
for creative food remains intact

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cover story dining out



Ken Oringer was a young chef and the economy was strong when he opened his elegant French restaurant in 1997. Fifteen years later, with a newly done dining room and other changes, it seems like a good time to revisit.

Clio

BY DEVRA FIRST | GLOBE STAFF

This year, the Eliot Hotel's Clio marks its 15th anniversary, celebrating with a spruce-up of the restaurant's interior and other changes that seem designed to invite a revisit. So here we go.

Clio debuted in 1997, elegant and French, a young chef named Ken Oringer at the helm. The economy was strong, and new restaurants were opening in a quantity some felt Boston might not support. Surprise. The restaurant scene remains robust, dining a primary form of entertainment. Clio keeps ticking. The young chef, now seasoned, has gone on to open other, less-formal restaurants, maintaining a high standard for food while injecting Boston's dining scene with much-needed fun.

That is dining's wheelhouse right now, so what of Clio, a mature 15 and still relatively formal? After renovations, the dining room is modernized without looking too different. Threadbare seats have been reupholstered, but the signature leopard-print carpet still lets out its muted roar upon the floor. Half the customers are casually dressed, but on every visit there is at least one man who looks like an undercover Michelin inspector, dining alone in deep communion with his plate. Updates are most pronounced at the bar, which is lighter and more welcoming, with a few small booths. More seating was necessary — bartender Todd Maul is a real draw, with his chapbook of drinks embracing laboratory technology and tiki tradition.

In some ways, the restaurant feels like a listing ship, weighted toward the front. The dining room can be full on weekends, but the bar is busy much of the time. Uni, the attached sashimi bar, is too. When it serves late-night ramen, Thursdays through Saturdays starting at 11 p.m., there can be a wait. The people who show up for cocktails and \$10 bowls of noodles (so very fine, particularly the "umami ramen," which has the richness of butter and the deep flavor of barbecued eel) are younger and perhaps less-affluent than the usual Clio crowd. Capture their hearts with fun and a lower price point, and they will think of Clio for their special occasions.

Because Clio remains a treat. Main courses are in the \$30-\$40 range, at a time when the bulk of restaurants aim for \$20. That might get you an appetizer here, unless you want the \$30 Soupe aux Truffes à la Paul Bocuse, an adaptation of the French chef's classic. A chestnut-brown broth made with pig-foot stock is infused with black truffles and enriched with goat-milk butter, the flavor of which is largely lost in the soup. But on top is a lid of the flakiest, butteriest, most golden puff pastry — the best deconstructed croissant you've ever had. Poke a hole through it and coax in the slow-cooked egg served in a cup on the side.

Price is not the point here, of course. An impressive wine list offers some reasonable gems and a few offbeat bottles, along with a fine collection of sake. But many of the bottles are big-name, serious selections, from every region of France and beyond (a glass of Chablis is poured a touch too warm). Atop the à la carte menu is a note that seven-, 10-, and 14-course chef's tasting menus are available, no cost printed. If you need to ask. . .

The seven-course tasting is a pleasure, leading diners through miniaturized versions of many dishes on the menu. If only the

CLIO

★★★

370A Commonwealth Ave., Boston. 617-536-7200.
www.cliorestaurant.com. All major credit cards accepted.
Wheelchair accessible.

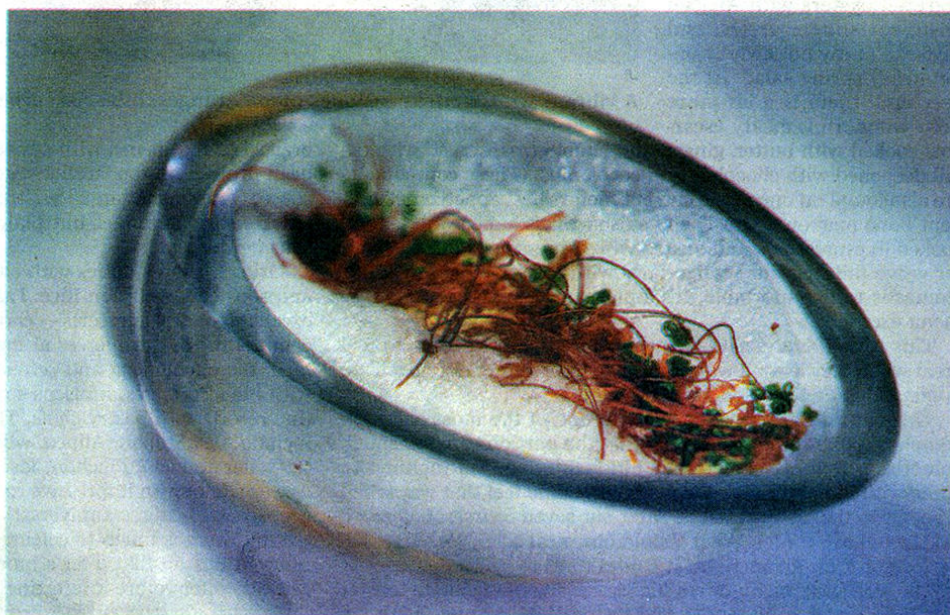
Prices Appetizers \$16-\$30. Entrees \$32-\$42. Desserts \$13. Tasting menus: seven courses \$115, 10 courses \$135, 14 courses \$155.

Hours Mon-Thu 5:30-10 p.m., Fri-Sat 5:30-10:30 p.m.

Noise level Conversation easy.

May we suggest Cassolette, bone marrow flan, butter-basted lobster, duet du boeuf, "textures" of winter citrus, seven-course tasting menu

Ratings: ★★★★★ Extraordinary | ★★★★ Excellent
★★ Good | ★ Fair | (No stars) Poor



PHOTOS BY JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

Ken Oringer (above left) with chef de cuisine Douglas Rodrigues. After renovations, the dining room (left) was modernized, Cassolette (above), one of Oringer's signature dishes.

path were more ambling — each course arrives bang on top of the next, without enough space for savoring. Clio's service is generally excellent, but sometimes awkward. One night, after a server with a thick accent tells us about our dishes, another explains them again, trying to be helpful. On occasion, workplace dynamics are too much on display; customers likely get their fill of bickering at their own jobs. And, at a restaurant that aims so high with its food, misspellings really should not appear on the menu.

But the food can be wonderful. An early taste in the seven-course menu is Clio's signature tomato-water martini, perfectly clear yet vividly capturing the essence of the fruit. It is garnished with basil oil, a caper berry, and a tiny, tomato-flavored popsicle. This nonalcoholic martini appeared on a greatest-hits menu Clio featured just before closing for renovations. That night it was more like a saltwater martini, followed by lackluster versions of other dishes. There was too much foam. The flavors were off. Now everything seems to be back in focus.

Also part of the tasting is one of Oringer's best inventions — in fact, one of the best dishes in Boston — his cassalette. In its way, it's a chowder: Milk is infused with sweet parsnips, touched with honey. Into this broth go lobster meat and uni, sea urchin roe, along with sea beans, jalapenos, and anchovies. Also in the mix are espiquette pepper and Korean red pepper threads, crisped shallots, chives, and candied lemon. The dish is foamy and ethereal, but it's a riot of flavors. Salt, heat, sugar, citrus, umami, the wild flavor of uni — "What's in there?" you think after your first taste. A little bit of everything, casting a net around Asia and New England and pulling it tight.

Halfway through most tasting menus, one starts to feel full. Not at Clio, where the courses are scaled down and light — sashimi with shaved lily bulb and yellow chive vinaigrette; oysters with African basil, coriander berries, and caviar; a pretty but awfully onion-heavy spring salad. At the very end, there is a bit more heft: wonderful, meaty escargots cooked with butter, ginger, and lemongrass, served with oxtail deepened with chocolate and cocoa nibs. (These components are also found on one of the current menu's best appetizers, decadent bone marrow flan.) Then venison that's almost too tender, cooked in espresso oil and dusted with espresso powder. Even after we've finished our mango tarts with togarashi caramel, our stomachs feel comfortable. It's a pleasant change from tasting-menu excess.

This is deliberate, says Oringer later: "I want people to feel great when they leave. I want people to have dinner at Clio and go home and get a little action." Well then.

This considerate thought leads to one of the most common complaints about the restaurant: that the portions are too small, something Oringer scoffs at as old-fashioned. I'm inclined to agree with him, although I can see why some feel that way when it comes to the tasting menus. After our seven courses, before we get the bill, we confer. What should our meal cost? We agree \$85 per person feels about right. It comes to \$115 each.

The à la carte menu offers bigger servings — Scituate lobster basted in butter until tender and just cooked through, with vin jaune-infused chanterelles and fava beans; a duet du boeuf of ribeye cap and short rib (the former bland, the latter excellent,

Ken Oringer's empire, in Boston and beyond

Ken Oringer is currently involved with seven restaurants in the Boston area and beyond, including Clio and Uni Sashimi Bar. His menus are highly influenced by his travels. In 2005, he opened Toro, a tapas bar, in the South End. Four years later, he and his partner in the Spanish restaurant, chef Jamie Bissonette, opened a second South End establishment, the Italian enoteca Coppa. In between, Oringer shared his love of Mexi-

can food with Boston, opening La Verdad near Fenway Park in 2007. He is also a consulting chef for upscale steakhouse KO Prime, in the Nine Zero hotel downtown. Farther afield, in Kennebunkport, Maine, he collaborated with the owners of the resort Hidden Pond to open Earth last summer. The menu there is driven by seafood, produce, and other ingredients from the region.

DEVRA FIRST



JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

A vibrant winter citrus includes blood oranges, hibiscus sorbet, and aloe ice.

braised in root beer), with parsley root-flavored custard that has been bruleed on top, spring vegetables, and a lemon balm curry sauce. Other dishes aren't as strong, such as a buttermilk-braised chicken that is tender but plain, with one or two tiny gnocchi sharing the plate.

Oringer shares duties with chef de cuisine Douglas Rodrigues and sous chef Brandon Rice. Pastry chef Chris Cordeiro does an excellent job with desserts — chocolate coulant, a towering pastry cylinder the server pierces at the table, releasing an ooze of custard; the enchanting and refreshing "textures" of winter citrus, with blood oranges, hibiscus sorbet, and aloe ice. Oringer has a fine record with pastry chefs. Those who have held the position include Alex Stupak (Alinea, wd-50, Empellon) and Rick Billings (L'Atelier de Joel Robuchon, Jose Andres's ThinkFoodGroup). The two are among an impressive roster of Clio alumni who return to prepare a 15-course anniversary dinner June 5.

And there is much to celebrate. There are fine-dining restaurants in Boston that offer a more-polished, cosseted experience. But Clio offers more-interesting food.

Devra First can be reached at dfirst@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter @devrafirst.