

Mistral, the edgy Princeton restaurant headed to King of Prussia

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by Michael Klein, Staff Writer

The 2017 crop of new restaurants in the Philadelphia area will include a branch of Princeton's trailblazing small-plate specialist, Mistral, which will take a large space beneath Grand Lux Cafe in the King of Prussia Mall. Scott Anderson, the self-taught chef behind Mistral and Elements, its fancier, more-upscale upstairs neighbor, has a lot on his plate. In October, he hired an old colleague, Craig Polignano, 35, to run the new kitchen. Last month, they sat at Mistral and ruminated over what they have planned for King of Prussia.

First off, Scott, can you define the concept behind Mistral?

Anderson: Just a fresh approach to small-plate food, appetizer-size food. It's a small-plate concept that you know you're going to have cuisine indicative of the city or area that it's in.

How did the new restaurant deal come about?

We were approached by Simon Properties. They had eaten here at some point after being on an eating tour of restaurants on the East Coast, Northeast, and they approached us about opening a restaurant in King of Prussia. Simple as that.

What made you say yes? King of Prussia Mall is a mall, and you own a freestanding restaurant in a college town in New Jersey.

Correct. We had always thought about opening a second Mistral. This presented us the option of doing that in an area that's close enough for me to reach every day. It provides us a place to open a Mistral in a different venue. We'll see how it works. We did research on a lot of the Simon properties, and we believe in Simon's future and how they're going to, I don't know, if they're going to redefine how we do malls. But I think that's what their future is, and I thought it was a good idea.

Tell me about the similarities or the differences between Princeton and King of Prussia.

Demographically, it's not at all the same, but we're eager to try it out. As for the restaurant itself, physically they should, I wouldn't say mirror one another, but they are going to look similar. As far as the concept is concerned, we know we want to keep the concept the same, but we really won't know what we're going to do as far as menu items necessarily until we get down there and we see what the people are all about.

When are you supposed to open?

Contractor says he's going to hand us the keys Jan. 23. So now I'm going to put that on the record so when he reads this, he's going to be like, "Oh, my gosh." I just called him out. Thank you.

So from Jan. 23 until . . .

Hopefully, we get up and running in 10 days, two weeks at the most. In the springtime when our patio opens, we're adding 40 seats, so it's a sizable restaurant, entirely 145 seats, once we're all up and running - the same as Princeton.

How about the look and feel?

Absolutely the same.

In terms of cooking? I understand that the two menus on a given day will be different.

Absolutely.

What is the philosophy behind that?

I think we have a concept that works. The only constant that I want throughout all the menus is that it's reliably delicious, but I want each individual chef to be able to showcase their talents and their cuisines. I don't know how many of the multiple-restaurant units have done that, but I think that it's an idea that could work.

When you started considering King of Prussia, what did you consider in terms of sourcing and the region itself?

Craig and I have a lot more research to do, but we already used a company called Zone 7 [in Ringoes, N.J.] that sources local produce and some meats and a fair amount of dairy, and they're now working with local grain growers and canola- and grapeseed-oil-expeller pressers. They hit a lot of local farms in the Pennsylvania area and the New Jersey area.

Is local always better?

No, quality is first. Locality's next.

Price is no object?

We're somewhat price-sensitive, but if it's an incredible product, we're going to try it out.

We do rely on seasonality, and we can assume what's going to be ready, but we don't know. Over the course of the last five, eight years working with Zone 7, the farmers themselves have gotten better. They're cellaring things better. As they develop, we can develop. There's a farm, I think it's in South Jersey, they have tomatoes ready in March. Their seasons are lasting longer, and they're getting things to us earlier.

Is the quality up there?

Anderson: For a lot of these farms? Absolutely.

How did you two find each other?

Polignano: Scott and I started on the same day at the Ryland Inn in Whitehouse Station. I started my internship, and Scott was hired as a cook [in 2001].

Where were you going to culinary school?

Polignano: I went to [Culinary Institute of America] Hyde Park. We worked together for about five years off and on. The Ryland Inn closed down, and then many of us went our separate ways for a fair amount of time, but we always stayed in touch. It was closed from 2007 to 2012. When it reopened, I went back as chef de cuisine, and I was promoted to executive chef two years later. Then I received a text message from Scott saying, "Are you interested in a new project?"

Anderson: Did I say that or did I say, "Are you sick of that place?"

Polignano: Something along those lines, yes. I think, first and foremost, I've always had a high level of respect for Scott. Coming in as an intern, it was definitely intimidating, and there I looked up to everybody. But there were a few people that kind of led the kitchen, and obviously Scott was one of them. We kept in touch [after the closing]. Everybody kept in touch, and I ate at Mistral, and just knowing the style of food and knowing Scott and knowing the way that he goes about food and the way that he works and his restaurant, I figured it would be a good opportunity.

You're physically working here in Mistral under chef de cuisine Ben Nerenhausen. How much input are you having to the current menu here?

Polignano: None right now. At some point, there's probably an opportunity for me to run some specials here and try out some dishes, but right now, I'm just here to learn the system and assist where I can and really understand. You know, it's a different style restaurant than I've ever worked in, so it's understanding the way that the food is sent out and the way that it's executed. Not necessarily the food itself, but the systems.

Does the customer ever notice the system, or is that just more back of the house?

I'd say the customer notices a little bit because of the way that the food is sent out. People order six or seven things, and it's up to the chef to kind of decide when something will be sent out - unless the customer doesn't want it like that. Typically, oysters go out first, for instance, and then, you know, as they work their way down, as it gets to the plates for two, they go out last. I think the guest does feel it and sees it, but I think it comes naturally to the table.