

# The Times Herald

## Mistral's shareable plates a hit at King of Prussia Mall

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UPPER MERION >> Small plates meant big news for the culinary scene at King of Prussia Mall when Mistral made its debut here three weeks ago.

The eatery spun off from owners Stephen Distler's and executive chef Scott Anderson's hugely successful 4-year-old dining concept located in Princeton, Mistral (pronounced Mee-strall, named after a strong wind that originates in southern France) is tucked away discreetly, almost inconspicuously, beneath the towering Grand Lux Café, forging a sweet little contrast between the elegant mighty chain restaurant and the equally elegant freewheeler down below.

The corner location's whimsical look, plus a quick consultation with Yelp that reveals several unabashedly ecstatic, four-star reviews, may be all that a hungry, chain-weary individual needs to allow the gusts of a venturesome wind to bring him or her inside.

"We have had some people who were familiar with the concept from going to the Princeton location, but we're a great place for people that want to get away from the chains when they see a freestanding, single-owner restaurant in the mall," noted chef Craig Polignano. "Whereas, if you want something along the lines of a chain, there are so many of them in the area. It's something unique at the mall."

Mistral's independence is a distinction it shares with nearby The Fat Ham at the Savor food court.

"Some people from the Simon Group had eaten at the Princeton restaurant and were interested in opening one here," Polignano allowed. "We were contacted and decided to go through with it. By bringing us here Simon is trying to do something a little higher end and different."

The menu, conveniently printed on place mats — "the idea behind that is that the guests can kind of refer to the menu as they're eating if they have any questions," Polignano explained — features such as American and fusion-inspired dishes as the top-selling grilled calamari with papaya salad, peanuts and brown butter (\$15) to the pork riblets with scallion pancake (\$11) and the here-to-stay signature Mistral burger (Angus beef, cheddar, bacon jam, aioli and french fries, \$16).

Most shareable plates roughly conform to standard appetizer-size portions.

However, the "a" word is not bandied about here loosely.

Instead, the menu is divided into snacks, small bites, large bites, salads and sandwiches.

"You can dine many different ways. The ideal way of dining would be to order a bunch of small plates and a larger plate or two to share," Polignano noted. "We encourage people to order two or three snacks and a small bite or two and a large bite or two as well. Everything is meant to be shared and spread around the table. The larger bites could technically count as an entrée but they're meant to share as well. We have a variety on the menu so that we're accessible to everyone. You can come in and have a quick sandwich or salad, or have the full dining experience as well. I was attracted to the concept the first time I ate at the

original Mistral in Princeton,” he added, “and have been a huge fan ever since. It made me want to be in this kitchen and create that style of food as well.”

Unlike some restaurant experiences you may have had where the entrée arrives at the table before you’ve had a chance to finish your Caesar salad, the appearance of each dish is judiciously timed, Polignano pointed out.

“We send the plates out as they’re ready, at a moderate pace. We don’t want to overload the table and prevent people from enjoying the food.”

Polignano has full autonomy in creating the menu, which will evolve seasonally and as frequently as he deems necessary.

“There is no corporate menu; no chef making sure that everything is the same at both restaurants. We’re incorporating our own styles into our own restaurants,” said Polignano, who added that ingredients are sourced locally as much as possible.

From the New Jersey pasta and Lancaster County chicken to the Kennett Square mushrooms, freshness and quality are key, he said.

“Locality is second; number one is the quality of the ingredients. If there is a local product that speaks to the season then I’ll certainly use it, but freshness and quality are number one.”

Captivating the eye as earnestly as the menu captivates the palate, the brightly contemporary dining room features traditional four-at-a-table seating, in addition to cozy nooks, full-service bar, lounge area, and even a diner-style counter facing the kitchen, one of the most popular spots.

Come April, al fresco dining arrives at Mistral in the form of 45 seats overlooking the parking lot.

Polignano is excited about the brunch menu, which makes its debut at Mistral this Sunday, March 26.

As with the lunch and dinner offerings, brunch takes its inspiration largely from familiar fare — chicken and waffles with smoked maple syrup and Tabasco butter, anyone? — thoughtfully tweaked Mistral-style.

“The menu will be a play on classic brunch items and we’ll incorporate some of our dinner items as well,” Polignano noted. “We’re trying to be familiar to people but presenting things differently in a tasty manner, using the best ingredients we can possibly get.”

Mistral at King of Prussia Mall, 160 N. Gulph Road, is open 11:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Thursday; 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. and 4 to 9 p.m. Sunday.