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The Philadelphia Inquirer

Alison at Blue Bell

Alison Barshak makes an impressive comeback, this time giving

full attention to the food.
By Craig LaBan
Inquirer Columnist

It is hard to make a comeback when you never really left. It's an even neater trick when you were never completely present to begin with.

But I have no doubt after some exciting meals that Alison Barshak has managed to do just that. Her new BYOB, Alison at Blue Bell, marks one of the biggest culinary comebacks in recent years.

Technically, of course, Barshak never quite separated from her hometown, where she rose to prominence a decade ago as the sassy, cover-girl chef who helped open Striped Bass.

There was a brief stint cooking in Manhattan after her over-hyped Venus and the Cowboy, on the Ben Franklin Parkway, flamed out after only 10 months in 1999. And in fact, Barshak has remained a New Yorker, living on the Upper West Side part of the week even as she quietly returned in 2001 to open Alison Cafe, a quirky little BYOB off the radar screen in Cedars, Montgomery County.

With its tarp-wrapped patio and limited hours, there was something noncommittal about Alison Cafe, as if Barshak might pick up at any moment and wander away once more. (It has, in fact, closed.) And part of the problem with Venus was that even when she was there, Barshak never seemed truly plugged in, never really focused on the essentials of cooking that make a great restaurant hum.

The mood is completely different at Barshak's new spot in Blue Bell. When you walk in, you encounter her orchestrating her open kitchen, that trademark blend of sassy hair-swinging away from



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Pan-fried skate is dusted with chili powder and served with a brown butter sauce and guacamole. Barshak's menu emphasizes seafood.

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kitchen, that trademark braid or ginger hair swinging away from the crowds as she inspects every dish on its way to the tables.

Slipped into the ground floor of a suburban office park, this dining room evokes neither the hokey country store (Alison Cafe) nor the urban high design (Venus) of her previous locales.

But it is more than pleasant enough if you don't mind the noise, a simple contemporary space with cheery blue and yellow walls and wide windows where food is the main attraction. And this time, it's worth noticing.

The menu retraces many of the themes that have outlined Barshak's career, with an emphasis on seafood and notes of Asian and Latin fusion. But there is none of the convolution that earned her earlier endeavor the nickname "Venus and the Corn Nut." The food is more stripped-down and the flavors more vivid, with good ingredients on best display.

Seasonal soft-shell crabs come crisped beneath shards of smoky bacon and posed over wilted greens and pan-fried ripe tomato. Rare seared quail roasts over a rubble of corn and mushrooms rich with rendered foie gras.

A dusting of chili powder lets pan-fried skate sparkle through its rich brown butter sauce and harmonize with the Southwestern notes of the soft masa cake and guacamole served alongside.

Barshak also has a knack for elevating more familiar dishes to something personal and special. Her fried squid is among the best I've had, amazingly tender and scented with ginger beneath squiggles of wasabi sauce. Duck confit gets Moroccan flair from pistachio-and-fig couscous and the gentle sour notes of a pomegranate-citrus sauce that unfurls with toasted anise and chipotle spice.

Some combinations didn't quite jell. The Asian duck tacos were essentially awkward, over-sauced Peking duck rolls without the indulgent reward of crispy skin inside. Grilled shrimp flavored with oregano got lost under all the lettuce in a bowl of Greek salad; I should have eaten the delicious feta-filled phyllo "cigar" and stopped while I was ahead.

And otherwise fine ideas, such as the roasted wild king salmon with seafood broth, could have been more delicately cooked.

But for the most part, the kitchen's offerings were a delight, full of smart combinations and good ingredients.

The grilled haloumi cheese from Cyprus, for example, is a real find. The salty, heat-crisped white disks piled with chopped lettuce, tomato and cucumber and drizzled with good olive oil are positively addictive. And bundles of grilled asparagus find new meaning beneath a dark, tangy splash of olive-caper vinaigrette.

The spicy chicken quesadillas - warm, pliant corn tortillas filled with elaborately seasoned pulled meat - delivered more satisfaction than the duck tacos. Thick salsa verde - pureed tangy tomatillos, chiles and toasted pumpkin seeds - gave moist swordfish an unexpected earthiness that was magnified by the intense flavor of white Carolina grits mingled with fresh corn and lump crab.

Barshak highlighted the almost meaty savor of red snapper by contrasting an herb-seasoned, crisply seared fillet with the dark



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sweetness of reduced balsamic sauce.

Her touch with a real steak was equally convincing (except for the chewy frites). The massive prime-grade rib-eye was one of the most memorable steaks I've eaten in a year, the tender beef perfumed with the campfire aroma of a mesquite grill.

With dishes like these, Barshak dispels any notions that her notoriety as a chef was built solely on hype. But this new venture also marks her progress as a restaurateur. It isn't easy to find good servers in the suburbs, but her young staff is personable and attentive, knowledgeable yet unpretentious.

The restaurant also has a fine pastry chef in Amelia Dietrich, whose desserts capture a perfect sense of upscale comfort. From her blueberry turnovers to her homey rhubarb crisp, her fudgy chocolate torte, and an upside-down mango cake saturated with brown sugar and butter - these are the kind of finales that make a comeback like Alison at Blue Bell worth coming back for.

Next Sunday in Image, Craig LaBan reviews Osaka, in Chestnut Hill.

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