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[TOM STAUFFER](#)

Tucson Citizen



VAL CAÑEZ/Tucson Citizen

The Rock Shrimp Ceviche is a fresh, clean appetizer with subtle, balanced flavors.

elle plays it close to the vest, from the lower-case moniker to its subtle teaming of French, Italian and California-fresh fare.

There's an unpretentious yet elegant sense of place at work here, a harmony of the historic Broadway Village confines and the casually graceful atmosphere, service and fare that give elle a quiet yet distinct signature.

Tucson's only Wine Country Restaurant, it offers not only an extensive selection of wines but also goes to considerable lengths to optimally pair them to a menu that draws a bead on simplicity and classic technique, tweaked with clever, imaginative notes and themes.

We started a recent visit with the Rock Shrimp Ceviche (\$10), a great introduction to the subtle power that exemplifies elle at its best, a measured commitment to teaming flavors and textures that mirrors the effort spent in pairing just the right wine to just the right food. The large bowl was generously portioned with medium-shrimp that were cleanly fresh and nicely stiffened by an elegant ceviche. The teaming of cantaloupe and meticulously sectioned ruby red grapefruit and navel oranges took the ceviche's lime to a new and different place. The lack of overwhelming acidity and spicy heat provided a refreshing, more open canvas with which to savor the sweetness of the shrimp and fruit.

Our other starter, the elle Antipasta (\$12.75) was a well-balanced collection of hot coppacola, green peppercorn salami, marinated artichokes, bell peppers and mushrooms, rounded out with three thick slices of house-made mozzarella and goat-cheese stuffed peppadew peppers that were surprisingly sweet and tangy. The mild, dense mozzarella made for a good counterpoint to the salumi, which also included a sultry pile of prosciutto that wasn't listed on the menu.

The Portuguese Short Ribs (\$22) entree has long been a favorite here. A generous serving of two large ribs cut from the bone and served flat, they were sided by mashed red potatoes and braised cabbage. The braised ribs were thick and tender, trimmed to include a good payoff of fatty richness, and had notably enduring notes of cinnamon, mint and red wine, which just as pleasantly accented the potatoes and cabbage.



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Tucson's only Wine Country Restaurant takes as much care with its flavor pairings as it does with its wine pairings.

AT A GLANCE

Address and phone: 3048 E.

Broadway, 327-0500

Hours: 11:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. Mondays - Thursdays, 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 4 to 9 p.m. Sundays

Prices: Appetizers from \$7.75 to \$13.50, soups and salads from \$4.25 to \$9.75, pastas and risottos from \$11.75 to \$18.25, entrees from \$13.50 to \$30, desserts from \$5.50 to \$9 Bar: full

Vegetarian options: Many, including Caponata with Garlic Bruschetta (\$10.75), Butternut Squash Ravioli (\$13 or \$17.75), Spaghetti with Broccoli Rabe (\$11.75 or \$16.25) and Risotto with roasted corn, haricots verts, grape tomatoes, parsley, lemon zest and goat cheese (\$12.75 or \$17.25)

Desserts: Warm Gingerbread (\$5.50), Chocolate Pate (\$6), Crème Brûlée Duo (\$6), Warm Rustic Apple-Cranberry Tart (\$7), New York Caramel Cheese Cake (\$6), Warm Bread Pudding (\$5.50), Gelatos and Sorbets (\$4.50) and CheesePlate (\$9)

Latest health inspection: An "excellent" rating Nov. 16, 2006. No critical violations were reported.

My companion's Gnocchi entree (\$13.25 for the petite version) initially struck us as anomalously aggressive compared to most of elle's fare, as the salmon was strikingly pungent and husky to nose and mouth. A few bites into the dish, the supporting cast began to resonate, with a rich, French-evoking meld of red onions, roma tomatoes and roasted pine nuts in a sweet pesto cream sauce catching up with the salmon. While my companion decided the dish was a bit too bold and fishy (we switched entrees), I found myself appreciating the pedal-to-the-metal dose of rich salmon against the pillowy, ethereal gnocchi and sweet sauce to the very last bite.

A nice feature of elle is that petite versions of most of the menu selections are available, even with desserts, a break in prices and portions that I wish more eateries offered.

We finished with petite versions of Warm Gingerbread (\$5.50) and Warm Bread Pudding (\$5.50). The gingerbread was dense and moist, not bashful with the ginger but not overbearing, topped with a caramel sauce and sided by banana gelato. The bread pudding had an engaging degree of crisp sizzle but was still soft and supple enough to merit true bread-pudding status, unlike other versions that amount to not much more than glorified cinnamon rolls. Served with a delicately rich bourbon cream sauce, this is the one dish we should have ordered full-size rather than the petite version.

The Tagliatella Pasta with House-made Italian Sausage (\$17, \$12.25 petite) is a no-brainer for fans of elle's Italian slant, and may be my favorite entree here. Also popular is the Butternut Squash Ravioli (\$16.25, \$13 petite), served with spinach and sliced mushrooms in a sage brown butter sauce.

While elle may not knock your socks off with bravado and bluster (the salmon gnocchi being the notable exception), it just as impressively slides them off with a smooth, sultry motion in keeping with its soft, stately surroundings.