


COLUMBIA COUNTY

# Flavorful Ingredients, Grown Close to Home

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By Emily DeNitto

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THE experience at Swoon Kitchenbar in Hudson begins before you even enter the restaurant. Pots of flowers and herbs — sage, lemon thyme — line the ramp up to the entrance, enveloping you in a kind of tunnel filled with the sights and smells of nature.

It's the perfect preparation for the food to come, which is startlingly fresh and beautifully presented and, despite its sophistication, tastes close to the earth. Swoon Kitchenbar marries the best of city-based training with the advantages of Hudson Valley ingredients acquired within miles of this Columbia County restaurant. The result is worth a detour during a weekend drive, or even as a destination in itself.

The restaurant is the three-year-old effort of Jeff Gimmel and his wife, Nina Bachinsky-Gimmel. Mr. Gimmel, the chef, was the executive chef at Michael's in Manhattan, and Ms. Bachinsky-Gimmel, the pastry chef, toiled at Union Square Cafe. They are passionate advocates of the idea that using locally produced food improves taste, and they proudly list their area suppliers on the menu, which changes daily depending on what's available. Items that can't be bought locally are delivered as quickly as possible. Most of the seafood, which dominates in summer especially, is Fed Exed daily from Portland, Me.

Thus, the winter point oysters on the half shell had all the musky sweetness of mollusks plucked directly from the sea. The accompanying ginger-lime mignonnette was tasty but almost beside the point. Peekytoe crab salad combined local grapes, kirbys and grapefruit juice in a wonderful, spicy broth, and the freshness of the crab, sprinkled with just-picked nasturtiums, made us feel as if we were eating on the beach.

Much of the summer and early fall menu is light, but that doesn't mean it's simple. Pan-seared scallops featured a flavorful, complex crustiness. Monkfish was prepared in an anise-flavored broth that included mushrooms whose texture ran from cloudlike softness to a pleasing woodiness. Blue snapper was roasted in a swiss chard and chanterelle sauce.

Other tastes hint at the heartier fare that takes over in cooler weather. House-made pappardelle, tossed with local butternut squash, made deft use of sage-flavored bacon and Parmesan. An appetizer of duck confit and potato croquettes had a rich, smoky taste. And a pan-seared skirt steak in red wine jus was succulent — and beautiful as well. The steak and a grilled Vidalia onion were both sliced and layered on mashed potatoes like a dark/light flower.

The beginning and end of a meal are also dominated by freshness. A recent "health margarita" special was made with just-squeezed pink grapefruit juice, and the desserts — all outstanding — used seasonal fruits in inventive ways. A creamy milk-chocolate panna cotta was served with warm, sweet pears. Homemade ricotta fitelle was accompanied by a contrasting apple ice. And don't miss the Mexican dark-chocolate crème brûlée, which gave a new taste twist to the ubiquitous dessert.

All of this is best enjoyed when Swoon Kitchenbar isn't too busy. On a summer weekend night, when there was a waiting list to get in and a packed bar, water glasses were left empty or never brought, waits for ordering and for food to arrive were too long and the waiters were too harried to answer questions. By contrast, on a calm weekday night, the service was attentive, warm and knowledgeable. There was a chance to sit back and enjoy the lovely environment — a high-ceilinged space painted in warm tones, with soft lighting and gorgeous, fresh (of course) flowers.

## Swoon Kitchenbar

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[www.swoonkitchenbar.com](http://www.swoonkitchenbar.com)

**VERY GOOD**