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# Leap of Faith

Sophistication,  
simplicity,  
and success  
find a home  
in Kittery's  
Anneke Jans

FEAST

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Photography François Gagné

On Valentine's Day in 2005, retired entrepreneur Andy Livingston and his self-described soul mate and business partner, Donna Ryan, took a giant leap of faith when they opened Anneke Jans, an intimate bistro on Wallingford Square in Kittery. With cork walls stained to a rich cordovan patina, black lacquered trim, and a floor-to-ceiling wall of windows that folds away on warm days, the decor is New York hip meets relaxed Maine intimacy. With no previous restaurant experience, Livingston and Ryan started the fledgling venture armed with little more than a love of food, an appreciation for wine, and a dream.

"I told myself, it was now or never," says Livingston, looking delighted and more than a little surprised at the ongoing success of the restaurant. Before taking their first reservation, the staff practiced service and food preparation for weeks on friends and local residents. For the restaurant's soft opening, which took place on a cold winter evening, they expected to fill only a handful of the dining room's fifty-two seats. But more than one hundred people showed up that night, and the restaurant has been consistently full ever since.

Since that auspicious night, Livingston and Ryan have built a management team and staff of impressive talent and dedication. Chef Charlie Cicero, who came to the restaurant two-and-a-half years ago, feels like he has found a home at Anneke Jans. At 35, Cicero is enjoying the most productive and creative years of his career. He is committed to using



Topping the list of enduring favorites are Chef Cicero's fried olives...with their hot, briny burst of flavor.



According to Chef Cicero, server Ken Paiva (above) is "the best waitperson on the seacoast." He brought a loyal following with him to Anneke Jans over two years ago. With his ready smile and encyclopedic knowledge of the menu offerings, he is one of the reasons customers return again and again.



Chef Cicero and his kitchen staff (left, top) have a clear view of the restaurant and the ability to spot problems and opportunities at a glance. On this night they oversee a family reunion in full swing, feeding four generations of diners.

On fine summer evenings the expansive windows at Anneke Jans open the room onto Wallingford Square (left, middle). Crisp black trim and gray-blue clapboards create a chic and inviting entrance.



A full house (left, bottom) is status quo for the restaurant. Owners Andy Livingston and Donna Ryan have created a haven for returning customers, both locals and visitors to the seacoast who make Anneke Jans a regular stop when they're in town.

Anneke Jans: [annekejans.net](http://annekejans.net), 207-439-0001

local or regional foods in his preparations and developing relationships with farmers and purveyors in neighboring towns. “I love that the guy who grows many of our greens also takes our used cooking oil as biofuel to heat his greenhouses,” says Cicero. Beyond his commitment to local providers, Cicero, along with his sous chef Henry Ares, grows most of the kitchen’s tomatoes, zucchini, and herbs in a garden across the street.

From his vantage in the open kitchen at the back of the restaurant, Chef Cicero can see every table while he cooks. As mindful of the tenor of the dining room as he is of the food being prepared, he can immediately signal general manager and maitre d’ Anthony Aiken if he sees a problem. “We observe the five-minute rule here,” says Cicero. “We can fix just about any problem a guest is having in five minutes or less.”

Problems, however, are few and far between. The restaurant is a haven for regulars, who are invited to become part of the extended Anneke Jans family. “We want our customers to give us feedback,” explains Livingston. “We test-run new dishes with people we know will give us an honest opinion.” Topping the list of enduring favorites are Chef Cicero’s fried olives—an appetizer that wins over even the most skeptical palates with their hot, briny burst of flavor—and his signature Bangs Island mussels, which are meticulously prepared with crisp bacon and Great Hill Blue, a gourmet raw-milk blue cheese.

Cicero and Livingston, an accomplished amateur chef in his own right, are of one mind when it comes to the composition of the menu. “We both like big tastes,” says Cicero. “But my food is still very basic. I try not to use more than five ingredients for any dish.” The chef, who refers to the restaurant as an “American gastro pub,” handles those muscular flavors with artistry and aplomb. Whether it is a perfectly roasted organic chicken or meltingly sweet seared sea scallops, Cicero succeeds in blending ingredients while keeping each taste distinct. “In the end, we cook the foods we like to eat,” he says.

The bar at Anneke Jans is as important to the look and feel of the restaurant as the dining room. Before they opened, Ryan, who is responsible for the decor, sat at bars wherever she traveled, determining the



perfect height for the bar and the stools. In the end, she and Livingston found a vintage butcher-block kitchen counter that was about to be scrapped. They paid fifty dollars for the beautifully worn, thirty-five-foot length of wood, which they had reconfigured and set to create an inviting corner for both dining and drinking. “Right from the start, we’ve been wine oriented,” says Livingston. “Our customers love to try new wines by the glass, so we tend to have a lot on hand.”

To maintain an emphasis on the culinary experience, Ryan deliberately created a minimalist design for the dining room. “This is a relatively small space,” observes Ryan. “I didn’t want anything to compete with the food, but I also wanted the interior to be laid back and casual.” To that end, there are only three paintings in the room, all of which are placed for maximum impact in quiet corners. The burgundy-colored cork walls not only look spare and dramatic but they also absorb the sounds of a restaurant frequently filled to capacity.

An atmosphere of affability and abundance permeates the sophisticated bistro. The close-knit staff mingles easily with one another as they prepare for the evening service. General manager Anthony Aiken and the servers greet patrons as they arrive—first in a trickle, but soon in steady waves. “Even on the busiest nights, things still flow smoothly,” says Livingston. “Our customers will always be a huge part of that.” **MH+D**

Fans of Chef Cicero’s Bangs Island mussels preparation (top) have been known to drive hundreds of miles to enjoy this popular dish. The succulent shellfish are steamed in a white wine shallot sauce with a hint of cream, then topped with apple wood smoked bacon and Great Hill Blue cheese.

Both of Charlie Cicero’s parents are enthusiastic and accomplished cooks. He has worked in kitchens since he was 14 and never considered another career. “Besides,” he adds. “I just don’t do mornings, My father told me I’d better get a night job, and here I am.”

Fried olives? Server Ken Paiva encourages new diners to try this signature savory treat (bottom). “Trust me,” he says. “You won’t be sorry.”