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JERSEY SECTION – [NEW YORK TIMES REVIEW](#)....

## Primed for Success, in a Demanding Town –

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By [DAVID CORCORAN](#) – *of the New York Times*

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IF CulinAriane has the [Norman Rockwell](#) look of a corner soda fountain, that's because it once was. The compact ground-floor space in a stolid frame house, the big plate-glass windows, the pressed-tin ceiling — all hark back to a time between the world wars, when “Montclair” and “rack of lamb” would never have been uttered in the same sentence.

### **In the Region**

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The streetscape harks back, too. Restaurant Row this is not; CulinAriane is set in a quiet residential neighborhood, half a mile —

and about half a century — from Montclair’s bustling, parking-challenged central business district.

But it is Montclair, of course, and Ariane and Michael Duarte, the owners of this eight-month-old restaurant, have set out to win over what is perhaps [New Jersey](#)’s most demanding audience. On the evidence of two recent visits, they are well on their way.

The Duartes (he is 40, she is 39) have been at this for a long time. Although Mr. Duarte leaves the cooking to his wife — hence the restaurant’s name, pronounced cull-in-AIR-ee-an, as if it were an occupation or an ideology — they both know their way around a kitchen.

Graduates of the Culinary Institute of America, they met in Dallas, where they worked at the illustrious restaurant Star Canyon. They moved to Chicago, Mr. Duarte’s hometown, and linked up with some of that city’s best-known chefs before heading East. (Mrs. Duarte grew up in Verona.)

Mrs. Duarte’s cooking is not stunningly original, but it has what it takes to succeed in this town. It makes use of first-rate ingredients that change, appropriately, with the market and the season. It is expensive, but not outlandishly so. It borrows liberally from Asia, the Mediterranean, Italy, France and the Southwest. It holds the occasional surprise, like a small, buttery, faintly honeyed croissant that comes in place of bread.

And it can be eye-wideningly beautiful, like the rock-shrimp ceviche we had one weeknight — a martini glass holding an Abstract Expressionist composition of red and white and pale green and gold (shrimp, tomato, red onion, avocado, tortilla chips) flecked with bright green cilantro and moistened with lime juice. The flavors and textures worked as brilliantly as the visuals.

A simple salad of bibb lettuce with buttermilk dressing was topped with a deep-brown slice of prosciutto di Parma, baked to concentrate

its dense, salty flavor and to alter its texture from chewy to crackling. Heirloom tomatoes, at their seasonal peak, were nicely offset by aged feta cheese and thin slices of watermelon. The only surprise in the cornmeal-crust crab cake was what was missing: filler. Its absence made for one of the best crab cakes of the year — sweet, fresh and filled with character.

A couple of main courses failed to set off fireworks, notably a vegetarian pasta assembled with an almost audible yawn — linguine, broccoli, chickpeas, no flavor — and a \$34 surf and turf that incorporated thick, oddly dry filet mignon and a tiny lobster claw. But most were accomplished and elegantly presented.

My favorite was four large, fabulously sweet seared scallops over a ragout of wild mushrooms sautéed with truffle butter — a collection of subtle contrasts in taste and texture that required real finesse to carry off. Not far behind were roasted striped bass with a hearty, autumnal accompaniment of eggplant, tomato and flageolet beans; sautéed monkfish with oyster mushrooms and creamed corn; and grilled mahi-mahi with mango salsa and chili-rubbed sweet potatoes.

Roasted rack of lamb came with a vivid crust of rosemary and a helping of minted gnocchi that were a bit too pasty. There was no such problem with the yellow-tomato farro and baby arugula that brightened a seared boneless chicken breast.

CulinAriane has a few service issues to straighten out. One night a server poured red wine into glasses that had just been used for white; another night, a well-paced dinner turned into a slog when long minutes passed before anyone showed up to take our dessert order.

**The desserts were worth it, though, especially a strawberry-rhubarb tart and a chocolate extravaganza whose name says it all: chocolate-truffle-Chambord pavé with crème anglaise and almond toffee. (The Almond Toffee mentioned, is Miss Nicky's Gourmet Toffee)**

And that pre-dessert wait did give us a chance to take in the nicely refurbished space, hardly opulent but comfortable and relaxing, with its copper-painted ceiling and khaki-colored walls hung with paintings by Mrs. Duarte's aunt Annette Lieblein. As we finished dessert, a foursome arrived with bottles of wine, settled in and placed their dinner orders. They were clearly in it for the long haul. So, it would seem, is CulinAriane.

## **CulinAriane**

*33 Walnut Street*

*Montclair*

*(973) 744-0533*

### **VERY GOOD**

**THE SPACE** Old-fashioned store, now comfortable and relaxing. Wheelchair accessible.

**THE CROWD** Elite eaters, as befits the state's most food-obsessed town.

**THE STAFF** Friendly and mostly capable.

**THE BAR** Bring your own wine or beer.

**THE BILL** Dinner entrees: \$20 to \$34. **WHAT WE LIKE** Crab cake, cornmeal-crust oysters, rock-shrimp ceviche, bibb lettuce salad; striped bass, mahi-mahi, sea scallops, rack of lamb; **chocolate-truffle pavé**, all cobblers, tarts, sorbets and ice creams.

**IF YOU GO** Dinner, Wednesday to Saturday, 5:30 to 10 p.m. Reservations necessary.

*Reviewed Oct. 8, 2006*

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