

## Juniper Common Flashback to the '80s

**W**here were top Philly chefs dining on the evening of December 4, 2014? They were enjoying a meal straight from the 1980s at Juniper Commons, Kevin Sbraga's new restaurant on South Broad Street. What better way for a restaurant to iron out any kinks before opening to the public than to serve the city's best from the food industry?

Juniper Commons officially opened on December 8, and my husband and I were fortunate enough to be included in one of the Friends and Family Nights. Friends and family did, in fact, come to mind as the music, décor and food brought me back in time to my childhood — the era of jelly shoes and Cyndi Lauper.

The theme of Kevin Sbraga's third Philadelphia restaurant is unique — a tribute to the cuisine of the 1980s. When I consider this decade, I first think of fashion and pop music, from leg warmers and neon colors to The Bangles and Wham! Food from this time period was not top of mind until I entered Sbraga's new Broad Street treasure. The gentleman seated next to us during our visit summed it up perfectly when he saw his prime rib: "I never realized how much I missed this food!"

The music of Belinda Carlisle and Phil Collins plays as Chef Greg Garbacz creates comforting dishes that are unmistakably '80s. Diners may begin their meal with a seafood starter, such as the Seafood Tower or Shrimp Cocktail. What child of the 1980s did not consider shrimp cocktail a dining-out delicacy? On our visit, we opted for the Smoked Fish Platter of smoked salmon, whitefish, bluefish, lentil salad and pumpernickel. This dish was a light and flavorful introduction.

Several salads are sure to be hits. We enjoyed the Traditional Caesar prepared table-side for two. The dressing had a nice kick, and it was appropriately served on the clear glass salad plates notorious at salad bars. Speaking of salad bars, the mini make-your-own salad bar will be a favorite. Diners will receive a tray of small bowls containing salad toppings, such as chopped cucumbers and tomatoes, along with a bed of greens. This will serve as a much more elegant (and sanitary) spin on the salad bars made famous in the 1980s.

In terms of main courses, the red meat lover has many options. For more casual fare, there is the Dry Aged Burger with shredded lettuce, American cheese and pickles. And, when was the last time you enjoyed a prime rib of beef? Juniper Commons has one on the menu roasted over an open wood hearth. A classic Beef Burgundy with potatoes, mushrooms, bacon and red wine sauce also appears on the menu. This

dish had a melt-in-your-mouth texture from being cooked and served on the bone.

Who says chicken marsala is passé? A guest at the neighboring table enjoyed a beautifully browned and crispy chicken topped with mushrooms and marsala sauce. And, if you have a taste for fish, try the Stuffed Turbot with crab imperial, green beans and beurre blanc.

Sbraga did not overlook some classic Italian dishes from the 1980s, most notably the Fettuccini Alfredo with egg noodles, cracked black pepper and Locatelli. I was in the mood for the Eggplant Parmesan, which was as delicately layered as a lasagna. The eggplant, mozzarella, and marinara were cooked to perfection, and the ragu of carrot, onion, and plum tomato was one of the best that I have had in a restaurant. The subtle taste of the lemon-flavored ricotta folded into the layers was also a highlight of this lovely dish.

We concluded with two desserts — Harvey's Cheesecake and the decadent Seven Layer Chocolate Cake. The cheesecake, inspired by Sbraga's baker father, was so light and creamy that it reminded me of rice pudding.

While the drink list focuses on gin and tonics, it also features homemade wine coolers to round out the 80s experience. The retro atmosphere of upholstered booths and spindles atop a half wall separating the dining room from bar area complements the fare. In addition, burnt amber glassware tops the tables, and old newspaper clippings from the Philadelphia Inquirer and other local rags cover one of the walls.

Another focal point is the restaurant bakery in the rear of the space which will make all of the breads and sweets. This area will also double as a private dining space for up to twenty guests.

Kudos to Ben Fileccia, General Manager of Sbraga's restaurants, for bringing back the '80s to the Philly dining scene. Ring in 2015 with a journey back to 1985 at Juniper Commons...Happy New Year! 🍷



**Susan E. Poppiti** is a mathematics teacher at Padua Academy High School and managing member and cooking instructor for La Cucina di Poppiti, LLC and can be reached at [spoppiti@hotmail.com](mailto:spoppiti@hotmail.com). Other recipes and cooking tips are available on Susan's new food blog at [www.cucinadipopppiti.com](http://www.cucinadipopppiti.com).