

Anneke Jans, Kittery

BY JANET MENDELSON



Bill Truslow Photography

IN 1630, a Norwegian woman named Anneke Jans and her family crossed the Atlantic to settle in New Amsterdam, now New York. Her husband, a wealthy farmer, soon secured a land grant for 62 acres on lower Manhattan Island before he was shipwrecked and drowned off the coast of Wales in 1647. Their land was confiscated by the British, who deeded it to Trinity Church in 1705. Anneke’s heirs laid claim to the property, which ultimately became Wall Street. In 1950, at the conclusion of the longest court case in U.S. history—200 years—their suit was thrown out.

Among Anneke’s many descendants is Andy Livingston, who, when he and his wife, Donna Ryan, fulfilled their long-held dream of owning a restaurant, named the upscale cafe in Kittery that they launched early last year in her honor. Livingston had eyed the off-the-beaten-path location for seven years before Anneke Jans (pronounced ANN-eh-ka Janz) opened adjacent to the nation’s oldest naval shipyard. Decor and plating are overseen by Ryan, who manages to convey urban sophistication minus the pretension.

“Andy loves to cook,” Ryan said, “and always wanted a French bistro in a neighborhood, like you see in Paris or New York, with great food at reasonable prices and a generous pour. We felt if you do that, you’ll become a local favorite. He envisioned a restaurant where he could cook and invite his friends.”

They hired Julie Dunfey, an area caterer, as manager. With the addition of Executive Chef Charlie Cicero, the team found their groove. On particularly busy nights, Cicero calls Livingston to help the kitchen with prep.

“Charlie’s phenomenal,” said Ryan. “He and Andy have a similar philosophy: use the best, freshest ingredients; go local when you can; and keep dishes simple in the manner of traditional French bistro cooking defined by not using too many ingredients. We change the menu every day. It keeps the kitchen creative, the wait staff engaged, and our customers, some of whom come once every week, don’t get bored. We’re very clear in who we are.”

Tall windows open to Kittery Foreside’s brick sidewalk for *al fresco* style dining. Regulars know you can eat at the 12-seat mahogany bar even when reservations are full. The open kitchen fills the air with enticing aromas. Jazz plays on a fine sound system. There’s a full bar and a wine list featuring about 40 selections from Germany, Italy, Spain, France, and the U.S., including 16 red and 10 white wines by the glass.

The interior is understated—Zen-like—with what Dunfey described as “eggplant and black bean wallpaper layered in wax to feel leathery.” A cork ceiling helps reduce noise; lighting is minimalist. The single room seats 42 at tables clothed in white, accented by small black rectangular planters of silvery green moss. A pleasant surprise in the rest room is the artful wall-hung water fountain.

The menu varies by season. Among its features are seafood supplied by Browne Trading in Portland and such produce as the 12 varieties of potatoes available from Cold River Vodka

Sweet Corn & Polenta Soup

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|------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 14-18 ears of corn | 3/4 to 1 cup instant polenta |
| 1/2 white onion, finely chopped | Salt and pepper to taste |
| 1/2 stick butter | 1 russet potato, cubed |
| 1/4 cup cream | 4 slices bacon, fried crisp |

Husk corn. Cut off kernels and set aside. Put corn cobs in a large pot and cover with water. Bring to a boil. This makes corn stock or broth. Reduce it by one-third (by simmering for about one hour) and strain, retaining the broth.

Melt butter, add onion. Cook over low heat until onion is soft. Add corn kernels, cream, and strained corn stock. Turn heat to medium and bring to a boil. Whisk in polenta and turn heat back to low until mixture is thick. Remove from heat. Purée in a blender until smooth (be careful to fill the blender only half way so the liquid doesn’t splash). Cook bacon and chop. Blanch cubed potatoes and mix with bacon to garnish soup.

Serves 6-8

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in Freeport that the chef says “couldn’t be fresher if we grew them ourselves.”

“Balance is the key in any dish, in terms of texture, appearance and flavor,” said Cicero. Among his favorite offerings is octopus braised until tender, then grilled and served with roasted red pepper sauce, olive oil, poached potatoes, and microgreens dressed in an aged sherry vinaigrette.

On a recent Friday night, the house was full and the service was crisp yet leisurely. We began with tapas-style, deep-fried green Sicilian olives (\$4), a house specialty. Bangs Island mussels (\$8) from Penobscot Bay—with peppercorn, tomato, red onion, shallots, garlic, white wine, and parsley—were plump, tender, and sweet. Next we had baby greens with port-poached figs and herbed goat cheese (\$8), one of several salad choices.

Our main course, East Coast Halibut over fingerling potatoes, shrimp, peas, sun-dried tomatoes, crisp bacon, and lobster foam (frothed lobster stock and butter) (\$25), was succulent. The choices at nearby tables—Angus sirloin strip with roasted asparagus and pomme frites (\$26); wild mushroom ravioli with garlic, thyme and parmesan (\$17); seared sea scallops (\$23)—looked fabulous.

One of my dinner companions was downright ecstatic over something now rarely offered in other restaurants: calf liver (\$17) with caramelized onions, bacon, and mashed potatoes. Better than Mom’s, he said; more tender, with more bacon and less guilt. The liver, one of Andy Livingston’s childhood favorites, never comes off the menu. Cicero marvels that it’s consistently popular.

Desserts (\$7.50) are prepared in-house by Deb Chag. The choices included chocolate caramel tart topped with chocolate ganache and sweet Mascarpone, creme brûlée, molten chocolate cake, vanilla bread pudding, and a fruit tart, but I happily succumbed to steamed lemon pudding with blueberry compote. 

Contributing Editor Janet Mendelsohn divides her time between Massachusetts and Maine.

More Information:

Anneke Jans is located at 60 Wallingford Square, Kittery, Maine. 207-439-0001; www.annekejans.net. Open for dinner year-round, Tuesday through Saturday, 5 p.m. to 10 p.m.

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