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BLADE'S BISTRO

Kevin Bladergroen is chef and co-owner of Blade's Bistro along with his wife, Anja. He stands in the small courtyard encompassed by a low stucco wall and sweeps his arms wide to take in the panoramic landscape surrounding his new restaurant in Placitas, New Mexico. "I get to work and live out here. Do you know how lucky that makes me?" He runs his fingers through a shock of thick, graying hair and smiles, his eyes crinkling at the edges. "I know some of my neighbors out here, they commute every day to their jobs and drive a lot of miles each way just to get to live out here in Placitas. I know just how lucky I am."

Blade's Bistro may have only opened its doors to the public a few months ago, but more than thirty years of restaurant experience comes with this husband and wife team who have worked long and hard to bring the dream of owning their own restaurant to fruition. Says Anja, who serves as the manager of the restaurant, "We've worked together for years—here and in Holland where I am from. We've opened and run restaurants and hotels of all sizes. But it's always been for someone else; this time it's us living our dream."

When the couple completed a lifelong dream of Kevin's to travel the United States in an RV—an adventure that turned from one year into four—they landed back in Albuquerque to help launch the Standard Diner in downtown Albuquerque. "That was three and a half years ago," says Kevin. "I was the opening chef. And after that, we knew it was time to start looking for something for ourselves."

Their newest venture has become an instant favorite of locals and is slowly gaining a following in nearby Albuquerque, Rio Rancho and Santa Fe. When a space opened up in one of the only shopping centers in the area, Kevin's brother called and let the couple know they needed to visit the location. "We looked at a lot of different locations before choosing this one," says Kevin. "We wanted to be a part of a community, wanted to be a true European community bistro, where people came at the end of a long day, not just somewhere people went for special occasions. When we found this place, at first it was too small. But then some things changed that allowed us to open up the front the way it needed to be, and we knew we could make it work."

Anja talks of the challenges of remodeling the back and exhibition kitchens, of the adaptations the couple accomplished to turn the once-tight space into a comfortable, work area to accommodate the hustle and bustle of their crew of fifteen. She then points upward to the ceiling. "We added all of the skylights you see. We wanted more natural lighting, and they really brightened things up."

With colorful walls in deep, earthen hues of clay plaster, ambient lighting and an eclectic collection of artwork, Blade's Bistro blends Southwest architecture with a European mood. Long, plush benches and intimate tables for two line the walls of the bistro with additional tables filling the center of the room. An old-fashioned bar offers high stool seating, and the wall to ceiling mirror not only showcases the large collection of wine bottles but also widens the feel of the room. "You won't find a large-screen TV here," says Kevin. "We purposely didn't put one in. We wanted this

to be a place where people could come and get away from the cares of the day and not have to hear the TV." Along with an extensive wine list, the bistro offers a wide variety of unique cocktails as well.

And while the restaurant has built a loyal clientele of locals who visit regularly, the menu is anything but regular. Paris-trained, the chef deftly blends the best of American and European cuisine. The Spicy Crispy Calamari Strips, offered as an appetizer beside such items as Roasted Fresh Beets and Baked Oyster Rockefeller, come long and thin with an exquisite aracha aioli and blue cheese dip, offering the perfect pungent bite to complement the calamari.

Salads such as the Bistro Salad of grilled salmon, shrimp, and pancetta on a bed of mixed greens and the Spinach Salad with warm grilled peaches, diced beets, and blue cheese crumbs, come dressed. Says Kevin, "We like to take as much of the decision-making out of it as possible. It's always been my opinion that the chef should take care of you; make your dining experience pleasurable with as little effort on your part as possible. Just sit back and let the chef take care of you. That's the way I like to do it."

The menu provides a varied selection of entrees and specials ranging from the delicately flavored Chicken Franquette to the more robust Seared Duck Breast. The psells, with a serious kick thanks to ground chorizo sausage, is served up with a heaping serving of chicken, shrimp and mussels in a bed of white wine saffron rice. And the London Steak, thick and tender, provides the perfect palate for the subtle topping of blue cheese and port wine demi-sauce.

Deserts are made in-house by Pastry Chef Gillian Ellis, with the house favorite being the Chocolate Chile Pot, a dense dark chocolate mousse with just a hint of smoked chile. Some unique variety of crème brûlée is almost always available, and built from a base of crème fraîche, it is light and fluffy instead of the standard custard texture. Oh, and if the Grand Marnier Crème Bouleé is on the menu, wrap it up and ask for a piping hot, frosty latte. The two pair perfectly.

Beyond the excellent food and attentive service, the most surprising aspect of dining at Blade's Bistro turns out to be the reasonable prices, with entrees ranging between \$13 and \$21. "Where I come from in Europe, it was always important to offer the freshest ingredients, the best food for reasonable prices. We wanted to make sure that is what we offered here, too," says Anja. "Sometimes it's harder and more expensive to get the freshest ingredients here, but we didn't want to be so expensive that people could only come once in a while."

For now, Blade's Bistro is a hidden gem tucked away in the foothills of Placitas, frequented by locals. But as the restaurant's reputation grows, the locals may have to share their neighborhood treasure with those who discover this little taste of Europe in the mountains of New Mexico.

Blade's Bistro is on highway 165 in Placitas (exit 242 off of I-25). They're open from 5 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday and until 10 p.m. on Friday and Saturday. Wine Wednesday features 1/2 price bottles of wine with dinner. 505.771.0693. www.bladesbistro.com.