

Trout Fishing In Macedonia

Lake Ohrid, situated in the southwest corner of Macedonia (the former Republic Of Yugoslavia), is one of the oldest and deepest lakes in the world. Anyone who's been there – myself included – can tell you that this splendid body of water is filled with living fossils found nowhere else, as well as a certain gastronomically revered species of trout that's touted by the restaurateurs of Ohrid. Yet the best food I had was not at any of these eateries, but in the homes of my wife's friends in Skopje, whose obvious enjoyment in the kitchen, along with the full, ripe flavors of fresh produce either grown in the backyard or bought at the open marketplace, made for many a memorable meal.

The cooking of chef-proprietor Klime Kovaceski, a native of Ohrid, also leaves an indelible impression. For the past two years, he's been wowing the crowds that have flocked to his cozy, 62-seat Crystal Cafe on 41st Street. And why not? He uses the same essential recipe as his kindred Macedonians: fresh ingredients mixed with a love of cooking.

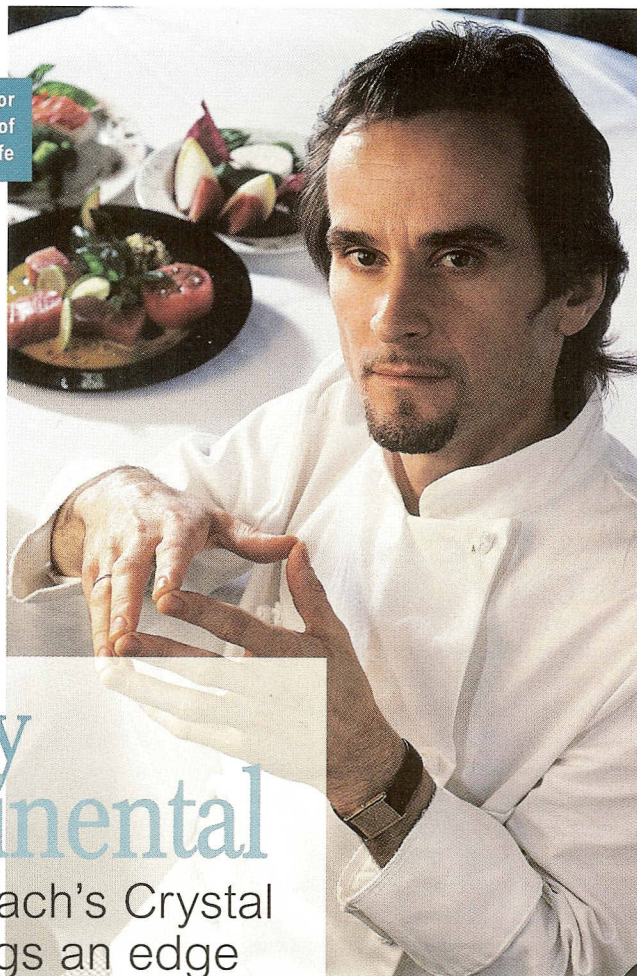
Witness The Schnitzel

When I worked at The Russian Tea Room, we used to make a cream-based stroganoff sauce with a superfluity of ingredients – onions, mushrooms, demi-glaze, garlic, tomato paste, sherry, vinegar, and Worcestershire, to name a few. Just before the dish was served, a humongous dollop of sour cream that would frighten a Muscovite was folded into the mix. At Crystal Cafe, the beef stroganoff (\$18.95) also comes in a “demi-glaze-onion-mushroom-sour cream sauce,” but it's a sauce of a different color – rich brown rather than pink, attesting to a light touch with the cream. Tenderloin tips get tossed in at the last minute, which helps them retain their rare and juicy quality.

Chicken paprikash (\$14.95) is another traditionally dairy-laden dish, but here it features a creamless, sprightly, and slightly sweet/piquant, paprika-spiked tomato sauce with onions and peppers. Like the beef, the moist softness of the chicken morsels testify to their cooked-to-order status.

Continental cuisine has, over time, had its reputation besmirched by overpriced, pretentious restaurants the likes of which writer Calvin Trillin generically refers to as “La Maison de la Casa House.” Chef Kovaceski calls his cooking “New Continental Cuisine,” and while it's true that he's lightened and modernized things, what he's really done is restore this out-of-favor fare to its original definition: high-quality ingredients freshly prepared according to classic European technique. Witness the schnitzel (\$19.95). It's not the limp, gentrified version in which the veal is pounded to a transparent thinness and then covered by a gloppy, Knorr's powdered veal stock-based sauce. Rather, Kovaceski's version consists of a substantial fillet nattily dressed in a crisply crumbed suit, with nothing drowning out the delicacy of the veal, bread crumbs, and butter.

Chef-proprietor
Klime Kovaceski of
Crystal Cafe



Clearly Continental

Miami Beach's Crystal Cafe brings an edge of excellence to tried-and-true favorites

By Lee Klein

A few more highlights from the 40-or-so entrées: rack of lamb (\$24.95), oven roasted to perfection with rosemary and garlic; snapper (\$19.95,) broiled with a roasted macadamia-nut topping and mushroom-onion sauce; and beef goulash (\$14.95), simply a mouth-wateringly delicious stew. All dinners include three accompaniments chosen from nine offerings: three starches, and six vegetables defined by cooking method: roasted, grilled, sautéed, steamed, creamed, and pan seared.

An Appetizing Backtrack

Upon entering Crystal Cafe, Kovaceski's French-Canadian wife, Huguette, welcomes you at the door. She also runs the dining room with a graciousness and professionalism that extends to the entire front-of-house staff, the best I've yet encountered in South Florida; they're friendly, attentive, and amazingly proficient.

Once you're handed the menu in this chic and comfortable room (recently remodeled by Saruski Design Studio), you'll probably peruse the appetizers first. Whereas the main courses are straightforwardly presented (meat, starch, and vegetable in hearty repose), Chef Kovaceski brings out bright colors and nouvelle-style arrangements in his starters: macadamia nut-crusted goat cheese (\$6.95) comes encupped in radicchio leaves, with a lusty red pepper-eggplant purée that lifts this