

daily NUTMEG

NEW HAVEN

Written by Todd Lyons



Small Plates, Big Tastes

Nini's Bistro, the cosmopolitan hide-away in New Haven's Ninth Square, has for years occupied a specific niche as our city's only prix fixe, BYOB restaurant. With an ever-changing, multi-course menu, Nini's has served as a showcase for the mighty cookery of Chef Stuart London, whose talents extend to Grand Gourmet (the catering arm of Nini's), Red Wagon Pizza (the traveling abeetz joint) and Beaver Brook Farm in Lyme, where he is head chef and cheese maker. At Nini's Bistro, he cooked with the seasons and his own culinary whims, and diners brought along their favorite wine or spirit to accompany a masterful feast of three, four or five courses.

But Nini's has evolved. Today, those courses are chosen from a lengthy printed menu – augmented with chalkboard specials – divided into four categories. Category One includes no fewer than 18 appetizers, which are all over the map, literally. A sushi-style Spicy Tuna Martini (fabulous) joins Country Pâté, Italian Potato Frittata, New Mexico Black Bean Dip and Satay Chicken. Category Two features six salads and soups, including a divine (and rich) Thai Butternut Squash Bisque. Category Three has 17 main dishes, including a Petite Steak au Poivre, Fish and Chips, Pork Osso Bucco, thin-crust brick oven personal pizzas, and the best Shepherd's Pie you've ever tasted. Finally, dessert. A choice of six, including locally-sourced Bishop's Orchards Pear Crisp.

From this multi-faceted menu, diners are asked to choose three courses from three categories of their choice for \$28.95, or four courses for \$33.95. That's a lot of bang for the buck, a true dining value, especially considering that, with a \$6 corkage fee, guests can bring their own favorite bottles to the table.

Yet an enhanced menu isn't the biggest news at Nini's: the big news is the small plates. Under a newish name – Nini's House of Tapas, a.k.a. Nini's HOT – the eatery now has an enormous selection of petite offerings, as well as platters designed for sharing. Many of the excellent choices on the dinner menu reappear on this menu as tapas, liberated from the traditional – some would say, old-fashioned — multi-course format.

Here, on the tapas menu, Nini's cuisine-without-borders makes all kinds of sense. How lovely that you can have a perfectly light meal of Fisher Island oysters with a watermelon basil mignonette (a luscious special one evening), followed by a hand-made lump crab cake with chipotle aioli (yummy) and a bit of greenery on the side, while your he-man date can devour a quarter-pound Black and Blue Burger, house-made Truffle Fries and a Flourless Chocolate Tart. For sharing, there are options such as Seafood Paella, Thai Crab Dip with Rice Chips, and a Mezze Platter of hummus, baba ganoush and carrot salad with pita bread; plus soups, salads and an entire section of Vegetarian Small Plates (seven to choose from). The chef notes that there are also six vegan dishes in the menu, and more than 20 offerings are gluten-free.

It was the customers, explains Chef Stu, who inspired the changes at Nini's, which were set in motion in June, 2011. They wanted less food and more choices. "People don't seem to want to eat as much," he says. "The prix fixe thing was too much food. We wanted to lighten up and keep an international theme – it's not traditional tapas." He notes that now, even the prix fixe menu is getting more action because the new portions are smaller.

What's more, Nini's HOT finally got itself a bona-fide beer and wine license. (You can still bring your own, and pay the corkage fee.) Our table enjoyed a bright, summery rosé – Scalabrone Bolgheri Rosato 2010 – but there are many fine vintages to choose from, priced reasonably at \$6-\$8 by the glass, or \$18-\$50 by the bottle, with many options under \$30. Bottled beer is also a bargain, with domestics going for \$4 and crafty brews for \$6.

This is hot stuff, indeed. For those of us who are big fans of small food, Nini's is a new oasis.
