

SCOOP DU JOUR

READ MORE SCOOP AT  CLEVELAND.COM/SUN

There is a special Aura thanks to the food at this b

Manager Ed Reif and executive chef Scott Buttari don't want you to think of Aura Bistro and Lounge as just another hotel restaurant. Although Aura is, in fact, located inside the Crown Plaza Cleve-



Cathy Phillips

paper-thin slices of raw beef tenderloin, made a welcome starter on a recent visit. Chef Buttari's rendition included piquant capers, minced red onion, and lemon slices on the side. The deli-

cate and meltingly tender beef was dressed with cracked black pepper, flecks of parmigiano-reggiano cheese, and a drizzle of olive oil to tie it all together.

land South in Independence, this pair is working hard to elevate the "hotel restaurant" experience above guests' expectations and even make it into a destination restaurant that will attract outside customers with its well-executed, contemporary American cuisine.

Main course selections comprise a mouth-watering selection of pastas, seafood, steaks, and chops. My sautéed scallops (\$18) arrived atop a generous bed of spinach capellini pasta, lightly tossed with a cream sauce that had just the barest hint of garlic. The four bay scallops were enormously plump and perfectly prepared.

Buttari grew up cooking from a young age. Some of his fondest childhood memories are of making strudel and garden-fresh tomato sauce with his two grandmothers. He later earned a culinary arts degree from Hocking College, working as a line cook to help pay his tuition.

Since graduation, Buttari has worked everywhere from "mom and pop" pizzerias to country clubs to high-end steakhouses to busy upscale resorts, including award-winning stints as executive chef at Hyde Park Prime Steakhouse in Cleveland and as chef *tour-nant* at Harrah's in Las Vegas. He says that hotel restaurants typically differ from stand-alone restaurants in that they're not generally expected to generate a lot of income for the hotel.

"They're more of a convenience for the customer," he said. That can make it harder to attract new customers, a challenge he and Reif are keen to take on.

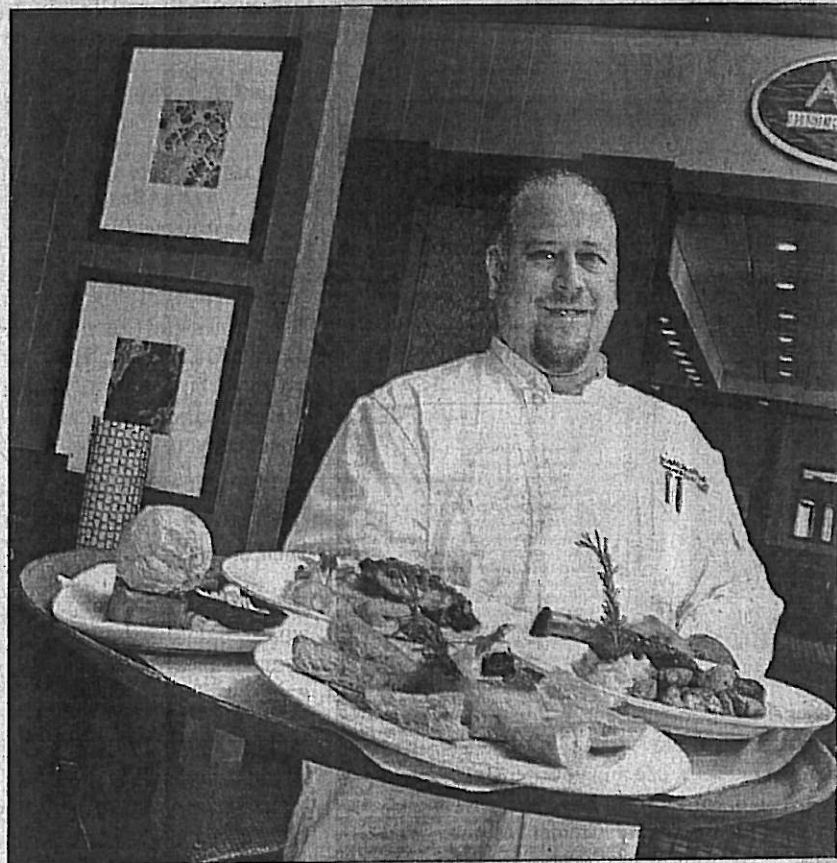
The atmosphere inside Aura Bistro still feels a bit institutional, but the view from its perch atop a hill is quite nice.

My dining companion's pork porterhouse (\$18) featured an incredibly juicy 12-oz. pork steak, seared with Cajun spices. This dish may also be ordered with barbecue or house seasonings instead. The steak was accompanied by the rich and delicious house Boursin-cheese-and-leek mashed potatoes, as well as perfectly steamed baby carrots and pattypan squash.

Do try the house buttermilk ranch dressing on your dinner salad. It's scrumptious.

Chef Buttari's creative talents really shine in his playful peanut butter and jelly *crème brûlée* (\$8). Infused with peanut butter and a touch of vodka, and topped with a swirl of raspberry jelly and fresh berries, it's a grown-up treat sure to please the kid in you.

Aura Bistro and Lounge is inside the Crown Plaza Cleveland South Hotel at 5300



Executive chef Scott Buttari is upping the ante when it comes to hotel restaurants.

Rockside Road in Independence. The restaurant serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Breakfast is available from 7-11 a.m. on weekends, and from 6:30-11 a.m. Monday through Friday. Lunch is served daily from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m., and dinner is served daily from 5-10 p.m. The lounge is open from 4-11 p.m. Sunday through Thursday, and from 4 p.m. until midnight on Friday and Saturday. Visit aurabistroandlounge.com to view the menu or to make reservations online, or call directly at (216) 524-0700 Ext. 7074.

Phillips is a freelance food writer in Avon Lake.

Send your garden-variet

This is the time of year gardeners and cooks alike wait for: tomato season. If you have tomato plants, right about now they are heavy with red (or purple or black or yellow) orbs. But this also presents a problem. What are you going to do with all those tomatoes?

Many will can sauce, but eating them vine is one of summer's great pleasures.

Log onto the Sun News recipe cleveland.com/sun/scoopdujour and submit a tomato recipe (or any recipe that may offer a solution to local gardeners). Crostini? Gazpacho?

We will publish the best recipes here.