

Dune

Reviewed by [Jill P. Capuzzo](#)
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Dining at the Shore brings a certain anticipation: nautical décor, open-air tiki bar, large platters of standard seafood and steaks delivered by no-nonsense waiters.

Dune, on the other hand, throws you a change-up. From the moment you enter the small, unassuming restaurant showered by the neon lights of its neighbor, the Margate Dairy Bar, you sense this will be different, beginning with the warm greeting from owner Nick Weinstein and the sign over the dining room entrance, “Be nice or leave.” By the time you do skidoo, you have dined on superior preparations of fish and meat, and perhaps gotten a little food education as well.

This was Weinstein’s thinking when he opened his 70-seat BYO in 2004—provide a friendly, intimate setting catering to appreciative palates. Dune’s menu emphasizes fresh, organic, and wild products that deliver memorable flavors. The restaurant’s interior combines a breezy Bahamas feel with brightly colored distressed-wood chairs and shutters, hurricane table lamps, and evocative black and white photos of local fishermen and Jersey Shore nostalgia.

“I’ve had opportunities to move to a larger space and get a liquor license, but the focus here has always been on the food,” says Weinstein, 34, who before Dune managed the Continental and Tangerine, two Philadelphia restaurants in the Stephen Starr empire.

Weinstein, a graduate of Penn State’s hotel and restaurant management program, decided to open his first restaurant in Margate because that was where he spent his summers growing up; he also bussed tables at age 15 at Miramar in nearby Ventnor, under another Philadelphia luminary, Cary Neff, owner of Sansom Street Oyster Bar.

Over the last four years, Dune has developed a dedicated following; several regulars reserve for both Friday and Saturday nights when they are down for the weekend. But Dune has undergone a change. Former executive chef Jason Hanin left to join Starr in the restaurants of the much-anticipated Chelsea Hotel in Atlantic City, and former sous chef Marino Rodriguez has taken over the lead spot. Working beside Hanin since the restaurant opened, Rodriguez, 43, previously cooked at casino restaurants in Las Vegas and Atlantic City, as well as in the kitchen of Madison Avenue Café, which occupied the same space before Dune.

“I was very confident there would be an easy and smooth transition,” says Weinstein. “Jason designed the menus, and he’d be the one to check the plates before they went out. But the guys that have cooked the food for the past four years are the guys I have in the kitchen now.”

One thing Rodriguez brings to the table is an increased emphasis on healthy preparations, a lighter hand with dressings and sauces, and a preference for fresh herbs or citrus vinaigrettes rather than heavier butters and oils. A prime example is the cracked-wheat salad, which requires a couple of forkfuls to

appreciate the subtle combination of flavors and textures: bulgur wheat with pecans, baby asparagus, mâche, and black grapes, dressed with a hint of herb vinaigrette.

Another signature appetizer is the mussels and fries, a generous mound of sweet, tender mussels in a champagne-and-chervil broth made slightly salty by the addition of pancetta. The fries are meant to dip in the broth, but I was wishing for a spoon to slurp up more broth. With that in mind, on my second visit I ordered seafood soup (spoon included), which featured mussels, chunks of ocean trout, and white beach mushrooms in a piquant dashi broth. For those interested in shellfish solo, the large, succulent Wianno oysters from Massachusetts were divine. (On Thursday nights, oysters are half price.)

One appetizer that missed the mark was the grilled baby calamari, which lacked flavor and showed little evidence of having been grilled.

The most inventive appetizer had to be the fish ribs dressed in a coffee-barbecue glaze and served on a tangy summer slaw. The fish is pacu, a meaty-boned South American species related to the piranha. With such unfamiliar fish is where the education comes in. One of the most popular entrées is skate, the bottom-dwelling rays not found on many menus these days, but here resulting in a light, flaky fish finished with a nutty brown butter. Tasmanian ocean trout, dorade, and black bass are each served skin-side up to encourage diners to enjoy the seared skin.

“The majority of fish we serve, we feel the skin should be eaten,” said Weinstein. “That’s where you get a lot of the nutrients, between that nice, crispy skin and the thin layer of fat. It’s the best part.”

Although the focus is fish, the two meat dishes on the menu were excellent as well. Marinated in a maple-and-red wine sauce (now replaced on the menu by a tamarind glaze), the half rack of lamb was cooked to perfection, as was seared hanger steak garnished with truffle butter. The one flubbed entrée was bland and slightly tough monkfish, which has been replaced with hiramasa, a kind of kingfish or amberjack. For side dishes, do not miss the fries piled high with truffle and Parmesan shavings.

Desserts were the only real disappointment. Chocolate-banana bread pudding was gummy; the topping on the fruit cobbler should have been crunchier. The one outstanding dessert was a cheeky combination of high and low—smores crème brûlée. The chocolate custard in a graham cracker crust with burnt marshmallow topping brilliantly reinvented this classic dessert.

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