READY FOR

The arrival of 9 Prime will literally elevate West Chester's dining scene

PRIME TIME

In a town that embraces restaurants like old friends, the arrival of a new eatery always creates a bit of buzz. And although it won't open its doors until December, the chatter has most definitely been humming for 9 Prime, a steakhouse that promises to give new meaning to the words "destination dining."

In the building that formerly housed the First National Bank of West Chester, the expansive multi-level space at 9 North High Street is undergoing a stunning revival — undertaken by local developers Con-Wal Development — as an immersive dining-out experience. Take three stories and four bars, add a celebrity chef, innovative cuisine, and luxurious appointments in a refined setting, and West Chester—you've got a new favorite to add to your go-to restaurants list.

If you don't believe us, check out their Instagram feed. But we went one better and caught up with their General Manager, Jerome Jones, for a bit of a peek behind the curtain at the team behind 9 Prime. It will take a seasoned professional to run an endeavor of this scale, and Jones comes with quite the pedigree.

"I have been in the restaurant industry for over two decades and have held all front-of-the-house positions—and have even done some work in the back of the house," Jerome told us. "I have been in management in some capacity for the last 10 years. Hospitality, training, and development is my passion." Jones's background includes stints in New York City, Philadelphia, and California. "Steakhouses and high-end dining have been my niche, and I love the experience that the level of service provides each guest and the team."

The site of the venue was a deliberate and thoughtful choice. "9 Prime will be the first restaurant of its kind in the West Chester market, and while we are excited to bring something new to the community, we are also thrilled to be in a space that pays homage to the town's history," Jerome said. "A unique, one-of-a-kind dining experience deserves a unique and one-of-a-kind home, so the old bank building was the perfect location for 9 Prime."

Indeed, it seems like every aspect of the restaurant is meant to set it apart, from the dramatic setting to the celebrity







chef. The kitchen will be helmed by Italian-born Fabio Viviani—chef, restaurateur, entrepreneur, cookbook author, and television personality. "So, as with everything that Chef Fabio does, the food at 9 Prime will be both classic and modern," according to Jerome. "As an Italian American steakhouse, guests can expect to enjoy premium steaks, chops, chicken dishes, homemade pasta, and more. A handful of Chef Fabio's nationally known signature items, like his acclaimed meatballs, are also likely to appear on the menu."

The objective here, though, is to be exceptional without being exclusive. We asked Jerome who he'd imagine as the patrons of 9 Prime. "I imagine that 9 Prime will attract everyday people looking for an elevated dining experience," he said. "Our restaurant is quite large and multifaceted. That, coupled with the breadth of our menu, means that 9 Prime will be perfect for everything from an intimate date night or an evening out with friends to a family dinner or a special occasion event. While our space is stunning and the food will be exceptional, 9 Prime is also approachable and welcoming."

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>
> **-Jerome Jones, General Manager**

And if you're in a bank...there's gonna be a vault. Sad to say there are no large wads of cash lying around, but on the upside, you can eat and drink in this one. "The vault is such a special, historical piece of the restaurant and we cannot wait for guests to enjoy it! We have gone to great lengths to maintain and restore its integrity," Jerome told us. The vault will hold tables for regular dining, and it can also be reserved for semi-private events.

So, elegance around every corner, several spaces for eating and imbibing, next-level cuisine, all set in a soaring historic building...what else could this place possibly have? Well, year-round terrace dining, of course. "We will have an all-season terrace space that will accommodate approximately 70 guests," Jerome said. "It's currently being built on the Market Street side of the building and will be a beautiful space for al fresco dining and drinking this spring!"

And as excited as West Chester is to welcome them, Jerome says that 9 Prime is ready to embrace us right back. "We are excited to be as involved in the community as possible. We've already started connecting with local organizations to kick off those relationships. In addition to being a place where the community gathers for great food and great drinks, we also want to be an entity that gives back to the West Chester community all the time."

Early December is the projected target opening of West Chester's new kid on the culinary block—just in time for the holidays. See you there.

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Form & Function

Exploring the design concepts of our borough's best kitchens and dining spaces. This Month: Mimi's Tea Cottage

Mimi's Tea Cottage is a brand-new tearoom between Market and Miner on High Street. What a delightful experience you will have here! Visiting this charming and already bustling space (make a reservation!) will make you feel pampered and cozy, with all the special feelings that you would get when spoiling yourself and your taste buds. Owner Karen "Mimi" Klein was excited to tell us about her menu favorites and the story and setting behind her magical Mimi's Tea Cottage.

When you step into Mimi's, you are no longer in West Chester; you are in a tranquil cottage somewhere in England, adorned with florals, pastels, teapots, and fancy chandeliers. And that's exactly the feeling that Karen wanted to convey to her patrons. She worked with interior designer Chrissy Gizzi to recreate the special experience her mother, sister, and their children had experienced while visiting tearooms together. With her love for tearooms and passion for baking, she decided to combine them to create her own place for making memories.

The ambiance is cozy from the mix of stone and wood plank walls and the added textural florals adorning those walls. It's all in the details here, with everything from their beautiful china and teapot collections to my favorite, the pink British-style telephone booth when you first walk in the front door. Among the noteworthy embellishments is the floral mural drawn by talented local Laura Stockdale (@laurarose.studio).

Point your eyes up to see the beautiful floral lattice that Chrissy Gizzi customized with crystals and twinkle lights. This place has eye candy everywhere you look. This even includes the bathrooms decorated with lovely wallpaper, pretty cupboards, and wood countertop sinks. Make sure to stop at their little shop in the front of the tearoom where you can purchase teapots, various types of teas, honey, linens—and even fun fancy teatime accessories like boas, white gloves, aprons, and fans.

You can enjoy a bottomless pot of tea or accompany it with food, both savory and sweet. One of Mimi's favorites (and mine!) are their chocolate chip scones and crumb cake. You really do not want to miss how soft her scones are, and they pair so perfectly with the thoughtfully curated list of teas. All scones are served with the traditional lemon curd, clotted cream, and jam.

Mimi's also serves tea sandwiches, soups, quiche, and more notably their full afternoon tea which includes all of that. The presentation is flawless with the food served on a beautiful and classic three-tiered platter. The menu changes monthly keeping things fresh and interesting.

This is a place where you will want to take your time, eat, sip, savor, and enjoy the warm, whimsical environment. It's the perfect setting for a quiet and relaxed catch-up with a good friend, or to celebrate a baby, bridal shower, or birthday.

Mimi's Tea Cottage is open Thursday through Sunday for lunch from 10:30am-4pm. I recommend planning a trip to try this gem out for yourself.

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Dining Out

Sampling some of the borough's best meals in West Chester's premier dinner destinations. This Month: Limonello

Trying to get my family together, especially for a meal, often feels like an exercise in futility. We are a large, busy, and ever-expanding group, and there's plenty of diversity within our clan when it comes to opinions about food.

For instance, my youngest sister is a vegetarian, and as best I can tell her girlfriend's happy to subsist solely on spicy tacos. And while my brother is also on the Mexican-for-every-meal train, I don't think my mother-in-law would show up for a reservation at a restaurant without an extensive wine list.

I'm certainly not blameless. Almost a decade ago I stopped eating pork, and my justification was that I'd read somewhere on the internet that pigs were smarter than dogs. Unfortunately I've read a lot of other things on the internet since then, so the list of animals I don't eat keeps growing. I can be insufferable to dine with.

But, who doesn't love Italian, right?

That's why, on a random Tuesday night, me and six of the people I love the most (all of whom drive me crazy) ended up at Limoncello, West Chester's granddaddy of Italian cuisine. They've been doing it right since before my 19-year-old sister could speak in complete sentences.

As seems to always be the case, Limoncello was busy when we arrived. Every table along their red-brick lined and flower box-adorned patio was filled with diners, and guests took turns holding the door for the constant stream of comers and goers.

Seeing the state of things from the sidewalk, and assuming we wouldn't be getting a table anytime soon, my mother-in-law walked right on through the front door, gave the hostess a quick smile and made her way to the marble-topped bar. She was promptly

Ricotta Board

Warm focaccia served with whipped ricotta and plenty of honey would be an equally valid order for dessert.

served a Chardonnay, which received an approving nod after a quick sip.

She had been lucky to snag the only open seat at the bar, with all the others occupied by after-work regulars, couples on dates, and a few friends getting together for cocktails, all of whom were happily swapping stories, sipping drinks and snacking with a familiar comfort. My wife, who was a little less decisive navigating the crowded lobby, followed her mother to the bar and insisted she was perfectly fine standing, since she'd been sitting all day.

As they streamed away, I put on my best I've-worked-in-a-restaurant face and apologetically approached the hostess, my body language intended to convey, "I know I'm the worst, I've been



where you are, but I'm about to ask you to seat a table of seven, at 7pm, with no reservation, and I hope you'll be nice."

And she was, simply saying, "Oh, you don't have a reservation? Give me a second to see how we can accommodate you, but it might be a little bit of a wait."

"That's fine," I said. "My family is always late."

Like clockwork, I got the expected text from my mom telling me she was running "a little late" just as I stepped away from the stand. I texted back saying it was okay, that they were trying to find a table for us, and that we were hanging by the bar. "Order me a sauvignon blanc," she said, "I'm gonna need it when I get there."

The problem was, Limoncello proved to be more accommodating than expected. Right after ordering my mother's wine, the hostess found me to say that they'd pushed together a few tables for us. This immediately sent me back into my apologetic posture to explain that only three of the seven people had actually arrived. I was again surprised by

Limoncello Tossed

This is the kind of salad you can't/won't make at home. There is just so much going on, and yet it all blends together perectly.

her, "No problem. We've got the table ready for you. Just let me know when they're all here."

As she walked away, Mom came through the door like a whirlwind, and after a quick hug and hello she found her Sauvignon Blanc then plopped into the now unoccupied bar stool beside her counterpart. The two moms immediately fell into laughter, which spread to the customers beside them. I started calling my siblings demanding updates on their timelines, because — in my overwrought mind — I was beginning to look like an absolute fool to this hostess.

In fairness to my sister, I'd misinterpreted the text she'd sent as, "Let's do dinner at 7pm," when what she'd actually said was, "We're working until 7pm, let's do dinner after." But somehow she and her girlfriend were the next of our group to walk through the door at about 7:20. By that point we'd started clogging up the bar, and I knew that my brother's "I'll be there in five minutes" was really more of a "Dude, I have no idea how long it's gonna take me," so I found the hostess and told her we were ready.

Limoncello occupies a pair of adjacent row homes along the modest slope of Walnut Street. You enter into the lower of the facades, which houses the host stand, the main dining area, and the bar where we had been hanging, all in one large, open space. We were whisked up a pair of stairs, beneath a brick archway and into the adjacent building, filing past a smaller dining area with views out large windows to the street, From there were passed the open kitchen with it's broiling pizza ovens, to a more secluded space with exposed brick walls and an intimate feel.

I seated myself at the far corner of the table and immediately began to stress about losing half my party on



Chianti Braised Short Rib

There's no need to touch your knife with this fork-tender, rich and savory entree.

the 100-foot walk to our table. But, our server continued to assuage my stress. Taylor didn't seem the least bit fazed by the fact that her seven top still had four empty seats, that everyone who was planning on drinking during dinner was at the bar arguing over who was going to pay that tab, and that two of the three people actually at her table had managed to eat all seven portions of the complimentary bruschetta in the 30 seconds she'd spent introducing herself. "I can see you're hungry, but we're still waiting on a few people," she said with a smile. "I'll be back in a couple of minutes, and we can talk about maybe putting in some appetizers."

> *"Thankfully it's hard to go wrong with this menu, so when my eyes scanned over "ricotta gnocchi" as an ingredient, I quickly ordered the Chianti Braised Short Rib.*

Fortunately for my sanity, the three wine drinkers weren't actually that far behind us, and my brother made it to the table before Taylor returned. Still dressed in his ACAC uniform and looking on edge, I decided against teasing him about his timing. And fortunately for everyone else, in an effort to try and redeem our tardiness with Taylor, my anxiety had pushed me to prepare some app orders for the table.

I knew from prior experience that it was impossible to go wrong with the Arancini — beef bolognese, peas and mozzarella encased in rice, then breaded and fried to a crispy, golden-brown perfection. I asked my wife to pick something, but she "didn't want to make another decision today." Since not everyone at the table ate meat, but nobody was gonna say "no" to cheese, I threw in a Ricotta Board. The focaccia bread that came with had the perfect amount of olive oil, making it slightly chewy but still crusty and crunchy. I dipped it directly into the jar of beautiful whipped cheese and decadent drizzles of honey and immediately felt a little better.

My efforts to save Taylor time were hamstrung by my mother-in-law's questions about the Limoncello Tossed salad, specifically, "What comes on it?" and "What is the dressing?" I'd like to be clear that the menu explicitly states: chopped romaine, olives, red onion, cucumber, cherry tomato, marinated artichoke, roasted red peppers, baby fresh mozzarella, basil white balsamic vinaigrette. I thought it sounded like there was too much going on for a single salad, but I should've known to trust Limoncello, especially about anything they put their name on. While the salad had a multitude of flavors, each was in perfect proportion, and the vinaigrette was a nice touch on top, not overpowering the other flavors or soaking the greens.

While we waited on apps, I coached our team into entree choices and made sure everyone was prepared to order.



Except, apparently, me. I was so focused on everyone else that when Taylor asked what I was having I drew an absolute blank.

> *The stress of our daily lives had melted like the mozzarella on Maya's margherita, and this beautiful meal and exceptionally accommodating staff had restored our sanity.*

Thankfully it's hard to go wrong with this menu, so when my eyes scanned over "ricotta gnocchi" as an ingredient, I quickly ordered the Chianti Braised Short Rib. My panic order couldn't have been better. The short rib shredded under my fork and was set off nicely by the chianti demi. This was served over velvety gnocchi with a rich parmesan cream sauce.

Another hit was the Chicken Limoncello: egg-dipped chicken, asparagus and lump crab with lemon and white wine sauce, served with your choice of linguine or broccoli rabe... which we ordered with both. As with the salad, the chicken proved it's always a great move to order the namesake dish.

Halfway through my short rib I took a moment to sit back and observe our suddenly (and blissfully) quiet table. Everyone was digging into a dish they were deeply enjoying, and many — like me — had begun to show signs of slowing down. Conversation was returning, but in a much less manic, frenzied way. It was jovial, instead of "here's the awful thing that happened today."

Maybe I'd been overthinking things, and I definitely needed to eat, but there was something more going on here. My guess is it's something many of us get caught up in during the middle of the week: work. Amber, Maya, and Jimmy all rushed to dinner straight from finishing a shift. Barb and Lisa both needed a drink after their days. Morgan was burned out from making too many decisions. I was anxious from trying to control too much. But after just half an hour inside this establishment, that was all gone. The stress of our daily lives had melted like the mozzarella on Maya's margherita, and this beautiful meal and exceptionally accommodating staff had restored our sanity.

Limoncello Cake

If a dish has the name Limoncello in it, order it. This establishment stands behind its name

So, even though I was already stuffed when Taylor came back to the table to offer dessert, I knew we could use just a little more indulgence. The family debated a few different items and asked for a whole bunch of extra spoons. A few digestifs were ordered, and although most of us needed boxes for our entrees, nobody shied away from diving into dessert. For my part, as soon as Taylor mentioned the Limoncello Cake, I knew it was a winner and that I'd need only one spoon. After all, if there's one thing I'd learned to trust, it's the name Limoncello.

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Date Night

Dinner for two at some of our favorite spots for quality time and quality food.
This Month: Spence Café



Want to peek behind the curtain? Lest you think of me like Julia Roberts in *My Best Friend's Wedding*, I'm not that kind of food critic. No surprise attack, no panicked servers. I prefer to meet with the manager, sometimes the chef, around midafternoon. They give me a little history, expound on the desired results of their culinary efforts, and showcase dishes that not only are they most proud of, but they think will lend your date night the je ne sais quoi it needs. The distractions are few (aka other diners) and the natural light is perfect for photographing food.

> *If you're native to West Chester then you know Spence has been around for ages, but in various locations. It's belonged to Henderson High School grad Chef Andrew Patten since its genesis.*

We all know by now that food brings people together, and as is almost always the case, what starts as a somewhat stilted, professional meeting ends with a hug and the promise to return soon. So, let me use my date with The Original Spence Cafe's manager Gina Shaw to elucidate when to go, what to order, and how to enjoy every delicious second of your date at Spence.

If you're native to West Chester then you know Spence has been around for ages, but in various locations. It's belonged to Henderson High School grad Chef Andrew Patten since its genesis, and its current spot is on High Street near Chestnut. The charming, classic West Chester building is full of light from the large, original windows; tables are spaced to keep conversations private, and the working fireplace blazes in colder months. The back patio, strung with lights, is ideal for a cool summer night date and is where I plan to reserve a spot for my next date. Though I'll soon get into the details of the food, I'd be remiss to not mention perhaps the number one reason Spence stands apart from the other fine dining establishments—it's BYOB! A rarity in town, and just the thing to set any date off in the right direction. The vibe changes depending on which night you go: Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, or Saturday. So let's dive in.

We'll start with the weeknight date. You don't necessarily care about the scene, but you want quiet conversation, top-notch food you don't have to prepare, and lastly, it'd be nice if the meal is budget friendly. This date is for spouses and ladies' nights—sorry, but men don't seem to dine out in groups as often as women. Start off with the Caesar or Mixed Green salad (because it's a weeknight and you're trying to eat healthy), then share the generously portioned Lump Crab Nachos and either the Steamed Clams or the Boom Boom Shrimp. The broth from the clams is so garlicky and delicious that you'll ask for extra bread, and it's okay if you smell like garlic because you will, and none of you will care. Now, all the desserts look fantastic but for this date night, since you're skipping the entree, order the Salted Caramel Ice Cream Sandwich with Oatmeal Pecan Chocolate Chip Cookies. First, it's enormous, and it's cut into four sections, so no fighting

Salted Caramel Ice Cream Sandwich
salted caramel ice cream smushed between lightly crunchy oatmeal pecan chocolate chip cookies.

over bites at girls' night. The cookie is something I'd like to recreate at home — perfect crunch, balanced flavor — and the salted caramel ice cream is the ideal complement. You'll leave with full bellies, full wallets, and big smiles.

The next date night is Friday, and it's for romantics. I like a Friday date night because, with the close of the workweek, there's relief and celebration. Sit on the patio under the string lights if the temperature is right or ask for a table near the fireplace in the back room. Your table is set apart so no one will hear your conversation, but the space has high ceilings and a background din that feels convivial and bright.

I like a Friday date night because, with the close of the workweek, there's relief and celebration. Sit on the patio under the string lights if the temperature is right or ask for a table near the fireplace in the back room.

Pop the Prosecco (tip: bring a small container of frozen Aperol "ice" cubes to pour your bubbly over and you've got an easy cocktail to begin your meal) and order the Roasted Beet Salad to start. It's deconstructed and served on a long platter, and the Prima Dolce ricotta is not to be missed.

Follow with The Baked Oysters Spence; with four oysters on the plate, you can split it evenly, and whether oysters are an aphrodisiac or not, it tracks on the theme. Next, order the Spring Lamb Ravioli with either the Lump Crab Cakes or the Braised Short Ribs; both of those orders come with two portions, so are simple to share, and they'll do it for you in the back if you request it.

The ravioli is a can't-miss: large, eggy yellow, and stuffed with cheese and tender roasted lamb. They're served with roasted artichokes to lend acidity, house-roasted peppers for a hint of smoke, and a buttery, velvety pesto that isn't overpowering, just complementary. On top, you'll find a generous portion of roasted lamb, which makes this dish heartier than a typical pasta order.

If you have any room left, share the Creme Brûlée for a nod to French romance and because cracking the top is fun. Gina told me that a lot of anniversaries are celebrated at Spence (and the reviews on Open Table confirmed it), and if you follow the tips outlined here, I think you'll leave hand in hand, with all the feels.

Lastly, the Saturday night date. I'm going to set this one up as a double date for you because at Spence the four top is the most common table for Saturdays. I like eating out with other couples partly for the joy of their company but mostly so I can convince them to order my second and third choices and then taste their food. Definitely come with a fun cocktail to share, and Gina will supply any mixers or glasses you need. When you make your reservation, ask to sit near one of the front windows; part of going out to eat on a Saturday night is to see and be seen, and these tables give you the best view of the action on High Street.

Start with two orders of the Tuna Tartare. Yes, I said two, and it will still be hard to share. The dish is served as a stack, with tender chunks of tuna that are fresh as can be, not even a hint of "fishy." It's topped with avocado, pickled cabbage, seaweed salad, and Sriracha aioli and finished with micro greens. I'd



Spring Lamb Ravioli
stuffed with cheese and roasted lamb and served with roasted artichokes, house-roasted peppers pesto, then topped with roasted lamb



happily eat it with a fork, but it's served with crispy fried wontons that have been drizzled with a sweet soy sauce that even further balances the dish. When you eat these appetizers make sure you're discussing something basic with your tablemates, because your ability to form intelligent speech will be greatly hindered.

> *Chef Andrew grew up here and has poured his heart and soul into this establishment for well over 20 years*

For your entrees, go with the specials. Chef Andrew works with Gadaletto's Seafood each day to procure the freshest fish possible and flexes his creativity in its preparation. If the special seafood doesn't excite you, try the Seared Halibut—another favorite of regulars and a staple menu item—or the Lobster Fettuccine. For the latter, Chef serves the fat strands of pasta with a velouté sauce, like the consistency of lobster bisque. The sauce delicately coats each strand and the Chef is heavy-handed with a portion of tender lobster meat in every dish.

For dessert, if there's room left, double down on the pie. Key Lime Pie and Chocolate Peanut Butter Pie will end the night on a sweet note, and with every dessert made in-house, you can't go wrong with either one.

No matter your occasion, a date night at The Original Spence Cafe can't be missed. I hope you'll make your reservation soon, and this is why: you can't really get more "West Chester" than Spence. Chef Andrew grew up here and has poured his heart and soul into this establishment for well over 20 years (seven in this location). He uses local suppliers whenever possible, and happily provides the staple dishes to his regulars (if he took the crab cakes or short rib off the menu, he'd have a mutiny on his hands) while showcasing his creativity each night with a host of specials.

Tuna Tartare
topped with avocado, pickled cabbage, seaweed salad, and Sriracha aioli and finished with micro greens.

Don't miss the unique art adorning the walls; local artist and teacher Dennis Hagarty mailed letters to borough dwellers with envelopes uniquely painted or drawn for the intended receiver. Andrew has collected them over the years, along with Historical Society photographs of his original building. With the softly lit, historical ambiance and a roaring fire in the corner, the mood is already set—just book your night.

Last thing, if I didn't say it emphatically enough earlier: order the Tuna Tartare.

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