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The 'Burbs: Stella Blu

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If necessity is the mother of invention, then it stands to reason that reinvention can be one mother of a necessity within the restaurant biz: knowing when it's time to re-conceptualize your dining operation and then bite the bank loaning bullet to put those dollars toward capital expenditures. While some owners invest in a new coat of paint and call it a day, others get when it's overhaul time.

Such has been the case with Kim Stregari and Marianne Gere and their six-year-old Stella Blu in West Conshohocken. The duo and packed-with-talent executive chef Ralph Pallarino has taken their smallish West Conshohocken corner and turned it into a stylized bistro concept. Through much of this past fall we W. Conshy office drones had to suffer through a shuttered Stella Blu, wondering what the heck was happening inside while missing our lunch breaks and after-work dinners there.

The old Blu, with its celestial and indigo motif, used to remind me of those quirky 1970's Philly restaurant renaissance places you'd find along South Street or in Chestnut Hill--the ones with the purposefully astrologically-akin vibe to them. Still, Stella's original form had more plucky-funkification than the prior occupant there, the ill-named/too-formal Siggie's L'Auberge. October, 2001 was not the best time to open any restaurant, yet the place survived. To this day, she's a very popular draw for the W. Conshy and uphill Gladwyne crowds.

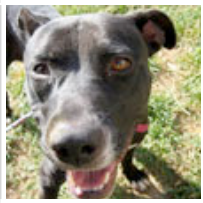
Always a good lunch/dinner bet, the restaurant had hardly any bar to speak of, just a dash-of-a-counter fronted by a few stools. At least the menu, straightforward and

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subtly Italian, was always consistent. Talk about Stella getting her groove back! The newly reopened incarnation is a startling contrast to her former self. Gone is the shabby-chic décor and now the abbreviated space is decked out with a soothing salon motif, appearing very Parisian and quite a departure from the past's glad rags.

The soul of Stella Blu is very feminine to me. I felt that the moment I entered her foyer and a black-and-white print of a coy, cocktail-dressed Audrey Hepburn greeted me with an over-the-shoulder coquettish stare. The front area has several chandeliers dripping bejeweled like low-hanging necklaces on a slim neckline, and finials are suspended from the ceiling like diamond earrings. Even her complexion is soothing: cocoa juxtaposed with powdered blues and gold-hued walls that shimmer with ethereal stars. Though she's petite, retro-style aluminum tables are spaced nicely apart, cozy yet not confining. No brass, nothing harsh, Stella Blu's soft mystique is original if not highly alluring.

And so is the bar now; Kim and Marianne shifted it to the other side of the dining room. They removed the clunky window booths that had been there, affording them great use of space for over double the seating capacity. Where they once had what served as not much more than a service bar area is now a real place for intimate sips and other assignments.

The menu too has been redone. Realizing today's trend toward sharing, they've opted for a small and large plate menu system, providing diners with the ability to couple delectable starters such as the lump crabmeat risotto in a sweet onion broth with wild mushroom marmalade (\$14) with, maybe, three mini burgers with Chinese mustard, chipotle ketchup and house made Russian dressing (\$9). Then split something more substantial like the lobster macaroni and cheese (\$26) or the Chicken Bella Luna with chopped tomatoes, garlic, mushrooms and hot cherry peppers (\$17)--two of several tasty leftovers from Stella Blu's former menu.

At a recent lunch (the menu is the same at dinnertime), my dining partner and I ordered two small plates: slow braised short ribs aside white bean puree with horseradish cream sauce and pine nut gremolata (\$12), which was comforting goodness on a chilly early winter's day. We also had diver scallops with apple-smoked bacon potato puree with charred-leek vinaigrette (\$14). The two plates made for an enjoyable surf-and-turf combo.

We also decided to split what was billed as grilled pizza with caramelized pears, prosciutto, gorgonzola and baby arugula (\$11). Though expecting something doughy, we were pleasantly surprised by an earthy crisp flatbread round, perfectly baked and piled high with its salad-y toppings.

Though I opted to drink tap water as I had to go back to the office (to do things like work and think), my cohort decided she was in holiday celebration mode having a glass of wine or three, which she ordered from a concise list of eight whites/10 reds by the glass. There's also a well-priced by-the-bottle selection comprised with usual suspects (Kenwood/Clos Du Bois) and a few interest-piquing notables (Irony vineyard/Dry Creek Meritage).

No strangers to the restaurant business, Kim and Marianne also run their popular Gypsy Saloon around the corner and they've just taken over a former to-go pizza shop (also up the street) and turned it into Bella Luna, which serves gourmet take-out meals and was named in homage to their first dining venture together (now defunct) in Bryn Mawr. So savvy are they, the duo was up for consideration last year by a major nearby hotel to run its internal, multi-millions-in-revenue dining room operation. Though the deal never went down, it's just as well. Three food service places keep their hands full and their time quite occupied.

As my fellow corporate-center dining partner weaved her way out the door ("I'm driving!" I yell as I reach for her keys), I took a quick glance back and Audrey Hepburn is once again fixing me with that sly Mona Lisa smile of hers and those flirty eyes. She is part of a very nice addition to the West Conshy dining scene. Her home in Stella Blu is the perfect new invention for this thriving residential/office-filled arena. And if the makeover may or may not have been a necessity, it sure is a welcomed one.

Visit [Stella Blu](#)

Ken Alan is a corporate concierge, the founding member of the Philadelphia Concierge Association and a hospitality writer for several regional publications.

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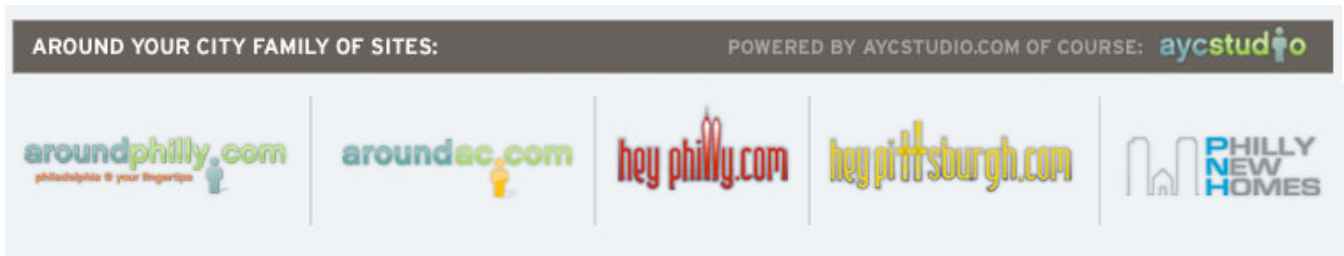
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