

REVIEW

Vanillamore

• MONTCLAIR



FOOD American, with dessert focus

AMBIENCE Modern, casual, fun

SERVICE Friendly, helpful

DRINKS BYO

PRICES Appetizers, \$4-\$24; entrées, \$26-\$32; desserts, \$9-\$24

OPEN Lunch and dinner, Tuesday-Sunday &

→ 349 Bloomfield Avenue, 973-707-5373; vanillamore.com

By *Marissa Rothkopf Bates*

Don't get hung up on the name. Vanillamore sounds like a dessert café. While there's no shame in making a meal of the extensive sweets menu, the restaurant deserves to be known as a savory as well as a sweet destination.

Risa Boyer, 30, the executive chef and owner, studied savory cooking while earning a 2011 pastry degree from the CIA. She later taught cooking, worked both sides at restaurants, and ran her own dessert-catering business. All the while she was planning a restaurant that would be, in her words, "sweet, savory, social." She practiced all her dishes at tasting parties at her parents' house in Wayne. Finally, last September, she opened Vanillamore.

"As soon as we opened," Boyer says, "my expectations were far exceeded as to how many people joined us for savory food."

Precision is essential in pastry, and Boyer's shows in all her food. Custards are silky, cakes have a tender grain, and shortbread cookies yield to a sandy crumble. But it also means perfectly fried sweet potato chips and small-plate standouts like delicate turkey meatballs with scallions and ginger. Pork belly did all the sticky, salty, fatty things you want it to do, aided by a smear of apricot purée. A bowl of creamy homemade ricotta drizzled with honey and candied toasted hazelnuts was a quiet pleasure.

All the salads were satisfying, especially the arugula and the mixed greens, the latter memorable for its delicately tuned, honey-scented salad dressing.

There are three large plates: hearty short ribs, an unfussy but satisfying roast chicken, and my favorite, the beefy

hanger steak served with focaccia and roasted brussels sprouts tossed with Caesar dressing—a clever twist.

Nearly every one of the 11 dessert choices comes as a flight, which means three different desserts under one theme. The Crazy for Caramel flight included an espresso tartlet with ginger-caramel sauce, vanilla-malt gelato with caramel popcorn, and a slab of bourbon pecan bread pudding served with salted-caramel gelato. The spring menu has bloomed with new flavors like lavender, blueberry and blackberry.

Milk and cookies punched above their weight with six chubby sandwich cookies and a pixie-sized glass of malted milk with a striped paper straw. These included chocolate chip cookies filled with thick fudge, chewy ginger molasses with toasted marshmallow, and my favorite, snickerdoodles joined with espresso-hazelnut mousse.

S'mores, with house-made vanilla-bean marshmallows, came lightly charred, resting on three different shortbreads: chocolate, vanilla and graham. Each got its own caramel: buttered rum, vanilla and espresso. I would take the espresso caramel to a des(s)ert island. It wouldn't be s'mores without chocolate, and it wouldn't be Vanillamore without another element, so there's also a demitasse of spicy Aztec hot chocolate.

The dessert charcuterie is a delight. Its elegant, whimsical presentation mimics a savory charcuterie board (think brioche doughnut split to reveal an ooze of vanilla custard, as if it were a runny triple crème cheese). The Vanilla Charcuterie appeared on a slate slab covered in treats enough to share: squares of shortbread (chai! vanilla! brown butter!), tiny dishes of honey-poached pears and thyme-marinated strawberries, plus "salamis" of vanilla and chocolate. It comes with a pitcher of vanilla-bean caramel, piles of candied lemon, candied nuts and a smear of almond cream. Luckily, it's served with a postcard that identifies the elements and suggests combinations, although making up our own was half the joy.

Being a first-time restaurateur can be fraught with challenges, yet Boyer's innate skill and attention to detail has made Vanillamore an enjoyable destination for savory as well as sweet. 🍷



libations



New Ways to Drink Pink

By *Tara Nurin*

AS A FASHION COLOR, pink had a breakout last year, and now it's the hot new hue behind the bar. I'm not talking rosé wines (perfect for summer, as always), but the upswing in pink-tinged ciders and even hard liquors.

Charles Rosen, CEO of Ironbound Hard Cider—made in Hunterdon County in the style of Newark's famous colonial-era ciders—says his retail accounts have been clamoring of late for a rosé cider. As it happens, he produced his first one, Devil's Harvest, infused with tart cherries and wild Jersey cranberries, last fall, and is bringing it back around Labor Day. By the time you read this, Ironbound's pink summer cider, Gooseberry Ginger, made with green and red gooseberries, will be out. By Halloween, he expects to have Cape May Rosé, a cider flavored with Cape May beach plums and aronia berries, in stores.

"I was surprised to see how many rosé ciders are out there," says **Michele McDonnell**, marketing director for Chicago-based Virtue Cider, which just launched its hibiscus-tinged Cidre Rosé in New Jersey. "It's a little bit of collective consciousness, I think."

Vermont-based Citizen Cider now sells its Brosé, made with Vermont blueberry skins, here as well. The company's three owners, all men, named the drink to parody testosterone-fueled bro culture. Sales suggest women generally prefer cider to beer for its sweetness, but Citizen says Brosé appeals to both sexes. McDonnell says Virtue's Cidre Rosé likewise has dual appeal, its floral-patterned can notwithstanding.

Pink gins from Gordon's and Beekeeper, made with fruit flavors, have earned a spot on store shelves. American-made Sweet Revenge Liqueur takes a novel approach, combining American whiskey with strawberry and citrus flavors for a 77-proof pink elixir or mixer. 🍷