

On The Road | At Mara's...Sweet, Savory & Seasoned with Jazz

By Gloria Krolak

On a Friday night at Mara's Café and Bakery in Berkeley Heights you can satisfy several cravings at once — answer the dinner bell, fill a sweet tooth and hear eight New Jersey locals wail at some not-so-standard jazz tunes. The octet is Jazz Lab 6+2, which began as a sextet, then added two more players. All New Jersey boys, they are serious and gifted multi-instrumentalists who just want to share what they've concocted in the laboratory. Jackson Liu, Mara's owner, gave them free rein over his 75-seat café and the result was rewarding.

The group has no real leader but drummer Mitch Germansky doubles as head of promotion and organization. Jean-Louis Saillot, electric bass player on this gig, gets leader recognition for hosting rehearsals at his spacious and instrument-filled practice space. Marc Ferranti, who plays tenor, soprano sax and flute, directs solo traffic on some of the tunes some of the time, as does Frank Grasso, valve trombonist whose primary instrument is the trumpet but since Bob Seeley plays trumpet, no need for two. Larry DeLucca on alto sax, Ed Werner on keyboards and Bob Balogh on guitar complete the eight pieces.

Warming up with a nicely swinging mid-tempo "Days of Wine and Roses" and the Jobim favorite, "One Note Samba," the octet got into a Wayne Shorter thing, including the ballad "Infant Eyes" with drummer Mitch Germansky opting for mallets. Germansky wears big ears — he's alive to what the others are doing, pouring it on or hanging back unselfishly. Mallets, brushes, sticks and even bare hands as on "My Little Suede Shoes," are all in his repertoire. He's as creative as drummers come and flexible too.

Saillot and Balogh nailed the Pat Metheny tune, "Question and Answer," a personal favorite and not one I expected to hear. Balogh said his son introduced him to the Metheny CD of the same name and fell in love with it. Small wonder, Metheny's trio included Dave Holland on bass and Roy Haynes on drums. "Jersey Bounce" followed, a number one hit for Benny Goodman in 1942 and a success here.



Jazz Lab 6 +2 gathers for a group photo. Left to right: Frank Grasso, Ed Werner, Marc Ferranti, Bob Seeley, Jean-Louis Saillot, Mitch Germansky, Bob Balogh and Larry DeLucca.
Photo by Michael J. Ryan.

Then, another surprise and another favorite, Chick Corea's "Sea Journey," with Ferranti featured on soprano sax and Germansky concluding with a splash of cymbals. A great tune, well played, and not that well known outside of Corea's fandom. The last set included Blue Mitchell's "Fuji Mama" with solos by Ferranti on flute, trumpeter Bob Seeley and Germansky on drums, the very kit that traveled the world with his father, Al Germansky and took Mitch five years to refurbish.

Then a string of Horace Silver with "Strollin'" arranged and directed by Grasso, and "Filthy McNasty," giving Ferranti, DeLucca and Werner some of their best solos.

As loose as their organization is, it's amazing they sound so together. After a few warm-ups they coalesced into a whole, their separate chemistries blending into an alloy. "Silver Serenade" and "Nica's Dream," with a fine Werner solo, both Silver tunes, were as smooth as the gelato in the display case.

Speaking of gelato, picture maker and helpmate Michael enjoyed not one, not two, but three desserts, following a plateful of ribs that begged to be photographed for its luscious color and arrangement. I had the chicken pot pie which was a little on the dry side, with a nice mixed-greens salad. We lingered over coffee, but others drank the wine they brought with them. Liu encourages BYOB, as long as you are of age. There is plenty of well-lit parking and the venue is suitable — and recommended — for children.

One last word about the acoustics: In spite of all the hard planes in the room (the only velvety surfaces were on the cheesecakes) and amid concerns by the musicians, the sound turned out not to be an issue. Support Mara's Café and your local talent. And satisfy that sweet tooth while you're at it. J

Mara's Café and Bakery

250 Springfield Ave. | Berkeley Heights, NJ
908-464-6176 | www.marascafe.com
Friday night jazz series, 7-10 PM

Gloria Krolak is host of Good Vibes at www.jazzon2.org.