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# Agricola is a delicious instant hit

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(<http://connect.nj.com/user/njockendall/index.html>) By **Cody Kendall/For The Star-Ledger**  
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on April 11, 2013 at 9:39 PM, updated April 12, 2013 at 9:00 AM

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Agricola

11 Witherspoon St., Princeton.  
(609) 921-2798,  
[agricolaeatery.com](http://agricolaeatery.com).

Hours: 5 to 10 p.m. daily.

★★★★½

It was a brilliant idea: showcasing Agricola's sparkling kitchen with a sidewalk "shop window," enabling passersby to watch the blue-aproned staff at work. That's the perfect lure for this lively new restaurant.



Creekstone Farms braised beef short ribs, a colorful feature at Agricola in Princeton

Tony Kurdzuk/For The Star-Ledger

Agricola, which means farmer in Latin, serves farm-to-table fare. Much of it comes from acreage in nearby Skillman that belongs to proprietor Jim Nawn and is cultivated by Steve Tomlinson.

Creating the magic that appears on the plates is executive chef and partner Josh Thomsen, a native of Woodcliff Lake who went west to develop his considerable skills. He earned "Rising Star Chef" honors for the San Francisco Bay Area, where he was inspired by his stint under chef Thomas Keller at the Napa Valley's famed French Laundry before becoming executive chef at restaurants in California and Las Vegas.

Chef/partner Josh Thomsen at work

Tony Kurdzuk/For The Star-Ledger

The kitchen originally was going to be in the back area of the restaurant, but Thomsen came up with the idea of moving it to the front. That was worth the trouble — who can resist trying food that looks so good from the other side of the glass?

It runs the gamut from enormous flatbreads made in the wood-burning oven (wild mushroom/\$14, house-made sausage/\$16) that are perfect for sharing, to the impressive entrées, such as the impeccably tender braised beef short ribs (no knife needed) over roasted root vegetables, with spinach for textural contrast and color (\$27).

Seafood choices include a fun starter, crispy Atlantic cod fritters (\$12), as addictive as french fries. A green olive/fennel tapanade brings a visually compelling arctic char dish (\$24) to life.

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As you can imagine, vegetarians are well considered here, with a wild mushroom stew (\$19) that includes farro, kale, sunchokes and the slight sting of harissa, a north African pepper paste.

Passersby on Witherspoon Street can glimpse Agricola's enticements through the sidewalk window

Tony Kurdzuk/For The Star-Ledger

Agricola's tagline as a "community eatery" doesn't really reflect the high caliber of the food and service, though it does emphasize the welcomeness that is an integral part of the ambience. While Agricola blazes a trail for up-to-the-moment eating in Princeton, it wisely includes respect for local history.

The restaurant is located in the completely redone space that previously housed the venerable Lahiere's, long the high-end go-to for university students and their parents, as well as alumni and residents who had been loyal through the years. Lahiere's old sign is still on the side of the building, where it will remain as a gracious bow to the past.

But Agricola is all about the present, extending itself to help food-based charities that are involved with hunger relief, nutritional education and culinary professional development.

Toast their work with wine from the well-considered list. Half-glasses are available for light drinkers and the budget-conscious. Inventive themed cocktails (\$10-\$13) include the Seedsman, Hendrick's gin with cucumber and garden herbs. If you don't want alcohol, there's always the fresh-squeezed lemonade (\$4).

Desserts by Sarah Hecksteden, formerly of the Inn at Little Washington, are compatible with the rest of the menu and the ambience, particularly the warm Granny Smith apple bread pudding (\$9) and the unusual apricot cake (\$9) made with teff (a gluten-free grain). House-produced orange-cardomom ice cream adds just the right touch. The devil's food layer cake (\$9) has a flavor that stays with you, but I didn't appreciate the black pepper that popped up here and there in the meringue frosting. I know, it's supposed to be a counterpoint to the sweetness, but it seemed unnecessary and just annoyed me.

A view of one of the dining rooms

Tony Kurdzuk/For The Star-Ledger

The atmosphere is rustic, in keeping with the farm theme; checked napkins, brick walls,

wooden benches, wooden floors and pegs on the wall for hanging jackets.

Unfortunately, the noise level can be quite high, although some of the dining areas seemed quieter than the one next to the busy bar, which stays open late. That's the only downside to this exciting spot, which is scheduled to be starting lunch and brunch soon.

The old landmark has become a new landmark, and it happened fast — Agricola opened just last month. Be sure to make a reservation, particularly on weekends.

Cody Kendall: CodyDine@aim.com



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