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The Irish Riviera

Who needs the French Riviera when we have Spring Lake, that offers great hospitality, gourmet food, well-mannered dogs, scenic beauty, pristine beaches and a two-mile boardwalk?

by Diana Cercone

Spring's a personal thing. Shelley gave winter credit for its arrival. Some say it's the robin. For me it comes on the first fresh hint of salt air. Doesn't matter the Jersey Shore's seventy miles away. You know the kind of day. The sun's warm on your face, and the pull of walking on the boards and dining on a Jersey fresh catch of the day is stronger than a riptide. This Thursday was one of those days, and the forecast for the weekend promised more of the same. There was nothing to do but give in. Grabbing a friend, I headed east on 195 to Spring Lake—my favorite beach resort town—and didn't stop until we pulled into the parking lot of The Chateau Inn & Suites on Warren Avenue an hour later.

Though I have been to Spring Lake countless times, this was my first to the Chateau, one of the eleven historic inns of Spring Lake. From the parking lot I could see the charming balconied walkways, some with cozy seating nooks, leading to the rooms and felt reassured I had chosen well. (O.K., I admit, I had booked my stay months in advance—I've learned that's



Opposite, dining under the tent at Matisse Restaurant. Top, a luxurious guest room at The Chateau Inn & Suites. Left, an exterior view of the elegant Breakers Hotel. Above, a charming guest room at The Victoria House and Bed and Breakfast.



Above, a view of the ocean from a table at Matisse restaurant. Right, Honey Lime Halibut with asparagus & jicama with a pommeroy vinaigrette served at Matisse.



always a wise thing to do here no matter the season).

Recently renovated, the Chateau reminds me of a European boutique hotel—elegant and sophisticated, yet because of its relatively small size (thirty-seven guest rooms and one bedroom suite), retains its warmth and friendliness. Both Scott Smith, the CEO, and General Manager Robert Murray see to that. The guest rooms, done in soft hues of mocha, gold, buff and cream and Italian fabrics, are ample in size and luxurious in amenities, including forty-two-inch plasma TVs, high-speed internet and refrigerated wet bars. Bathrooms have either a soaking tub or Jacuzzi; the guest rooms, a choice of patio, sun deck or balcony. Mine was no exception. Situated on the second floor, it held in addition a four-poster king-size bed, a cushy sofa flanked with reading light quality lamps (always a

good sign), a two-sided wood-burning fireplace and a balcony overlooking the sixteen-acre lake, just right for daydreaming or an aperitif before dinner.

In the Smith family since the '50s, a few rooms still retain names of some of their more famous guests: The Ann-Margaret Room, The Julius LaRosa, The Gene Kelly. Because of its close proximity to New York and Philadelphia, Spring Lake always enjoyed a live theater (and still does), and it was not uncommon to see many of Broadway's greats of the day under Spring Lake lights. Basil Rathbone, Lee J. Cobb, Ernie Kovacs and Edie Adams were just a few who played here. And when they came to town, they stayed with the Smiths at the Chateau. Now Scott is too low-key to tell you this, so you have to see Robert for the stories. And don't forget to ask him to show you the

album that Scott's mother kept during those days; it's great fun (See if you can spot a very cute teenaged Scott in one of them).

Normally after checking in I rush to see the ocean, but this time I visited the Spring Lake Historical Society & Museum, diagonally across the street from the Inn. Open Thursday, 10 a.m. to noon, Sundays 1:30–3:30 p.m. and by appointment, this is a must stop. Through priceless photographs and memorabilia, its permanent exhibition gives a timeline of Spring Lake's early days from farmland to the resort's reigning glory during the Victorian Age. Of particular interest are the photographs of the grand hotels. According to *The Encyclopedia of New Jersey*, "Philadelphians largely developed Spring Lake, investing in its land and erecting the substantial hotels and summer homes ... Leading Philadelphia architects

designed many buildings, chiefly in Shingle and Queen Anne styles. A number of Spring Lake's early structures were moved there from the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia."

On one of my first visits, I met an elegant elderly woman who said Spring Lake was known as the Irish Riviera, and was not uncommon to see Cary Grant's or Grace Kelly's yacht anchored a few miles from shore. She recalled the great hotels of the time—eleven in all, including the five oceanfront ones: the Mommouth (which closed in 1984), the Wilberton (now the Breakers), the Warren (demolished in 2001) and the Essex and the Sussex (now combined and converted to an adult

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condominium). During the summer months, she said, the hotels took turns hosting costume-themed balls. As she spoke, it was easy to imagine her dance card always filled.

But then, that's another great thing about Spring Lake. Though sporting a patina of high society, it's a friendly town. Conversations are easily started—either sitting in or strolling by the parks, the lake, on the boardwalk or staying at one of the inns. Nearly everyone has a story about the area or suggestion on where to shop or find a great place to dine. And if you're a dog lover, this is the resort to see some rarified pedigrees. Last summer on a girls' getaway weekend with my sister-in-

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Weekends

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law, we befriended two Afghan Hounds, an American Bandazze Mastiff, four English Springer Spaniels and three Burmese Mountain Dogs. This time I met an eager Great Dane puppy, fawn colored with a black face on the boardwalk. Though they're not allowed on the beaches, well-mannered dogs are a welcome sight most everywhere else—and, their owners are only too happy to stop and answer questions.

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Other times I have
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After lunch at Rod's Irish Tavern, a popular, casual dining spot in neighboring Sea Girt, we drove back to take a stroll on Spring Lake's two-mile-long boardwalk. I've walked it hundreds of times in the summer, a few in the fall—even on a clear, cold New Year's Day morning—and it never disappoints. On this day, there were several dozen others, some walkers, others jogging or running and a few brave bathers in the ocean. Surfers were starting to arrive to catch the choppy surf. We stopped to watch them, the ocean and the boats—a smattering of sailboats, motor and fishing boats, and on the horizon, silhouettes of tanker ships—from one of the Victorian gazebos jutting over the oyster-colored sand. It's easy to lose yourself in the ocean's rhythms. Other times I have sat here with a good book and not moved for hours.


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Unlike some shore towns, Spring Lake doesn't suffer from a dearth of great spots to dine. On the contrary, you'll find it hard to decide. But on this trip, I had three in mind. On the first night, with easy directions from Scott, we found the Shipwreck Grille in Brielle, near the marina. Though a favorite among yachters and area elite, it's unpretentious and friendly, and the food created by Chef Terry Eleftheriou rivals Manhattan's best. We started with a Shipwreck Shellfish Sampler (two oysters, two littleneck clams, two top neck clams and two jumbo shrimp)—so delicious and fresh, I wouldn't have been surprised to find the fishing boats just leaving the restaurant's dock. For my entrée I had an amazing succulent pistachio-crusted fluke with roasted golden beet and fennel compote with a horseradish cream sauce, and my friend savored every morsel of his pecan-crusted wild Alaskan salmon, finished with a brown butter sauce enriched with roasted pumpkin seed oil and accompanied by white asparagus, a puree of butternut squash and apple salad.

On Friday, after enjoying the Chateau's continental breakfast, it was time to move to The Victoria House Bed and Breakfast, a beautiful Queen Anne-style home on Monmouth Avenue. Innkeepers Alan and Lynne Kaplan have decorated it in authentic Victorian colors and furnishings, with each of the eight guest rooms holding its own charm and amenities, such as soft, comfy robes, sitting area, TV/VCR/CD players, a Jacuzzi bath for two or gas fireplaces. Mine reminded me of a bedroom in a Cotswold cottage.

We took advantage of the bright sunshine and enjoyed a leisure stroll around the lake, crossing it twice by way of the two footbridges. Continuing, we walked into town and lunched at one of my favorites, Café Artiste, where chef/owner Cosimo Maiolini serves Tuscan specialties with art and opera. Later we drove into Manasquan, three

towns south of Spring Lake and just a short drive, to watch the parade of boats at the inlet.

That night we dined at The Breaker's elegant Seashell Dining Room overlooking the ocean, where owner Joseph Scardino continues Spring Lake's tradition of gracious dining. Though modernized and redecorated, the hotel still retains its aura of European grace and thoroughbred ties to its past. During our dinner, I kept waiting to catch, if not Cary Grant, then George Clooney walking into the dining room. ... Perhaps, next time.

The menu is Northern Italian, and we started with a specialty of the house: sautéed escarole and

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cannellini beans, liberally laced with tender garlic and just a hint of finely ground dried red peppers. For my entree I had a grilled Idaho trout topped with a generous mound of lump crabmeat in a delicate white butter sauce with herbs. Having decided to make it a salmon-tasting weekend, my friend opted for the blackened salmon in a mustard horseradish hollandaise, declaring it nothing less than sublime. Both entrées came with Italian mashed potatoes and thick, hot slices of cheese-topped focaccia. For dessert, we shared The Breakers famous profiteroles stuffed with creamy vanilla ice cream and draped in a rich hot fudge sauce.

On Saturday morning I rose to the unmistakable smell of fresh coffee brewing. Lynne's a trained gourmet chef, and many of their repeat guests look forward to her breakfasts. After my first one on Saturday—fresh fruit plate with yogurt; a choice of Lynne's home-made granolas, either crispy or chocolate; poached eggs with grits; bacon; toast; juice and coffee—I could see why. Lynne also makes the cordials that she and Alan set out in the evening for guests to enjoy. A genteel and proper Victorian way to end an evening.

After breakfast we walked into town again and checked out the upscale shops along Third Avenue and its cross streets. My friend bought a hand-knit sweater for his mother from The Irish Centre, and I indulged in a box of homemade dark chocolate and pecan bark from Jean Louise, one of two chocolatiers on the street. We picked up a bottle of wine, a very nice Malbec, at The Bottle Shop to accompany our dinner later that evening. Though there's much to do and see in the area, such as bike riding—both in town and on bike paths—visit a historic lighthouse, take in a play, play golf or dine on a riverboat, this was meant to be a lazy weekend. Keeping to that, we were happy to return to The Victoria House and sit on its verandah and read, or later, when it grew chilly, move indoors to the parlor, warmed by a cozy fire.

Our last night found us again dining by the ocean. This time at Matisse in Belmar, Spring Lake's neighboring town to the north. Set in a Gothic structure built on the boardwalk in 1929 as a bath house, its owners Chef Anthony Wall and his wife Mary have transformed it into a charming dining room, opening up the back of the restaurant with large windows and giving way to spectacular views of the ocean. (In warmer weather, they also serve outside on the double deck and under an open tent). Chef Anthony, who grew up in Yardley, brings a New Continental flair to his dishes, using local available products. We started with a mesclun salad with crisp slices of apple,

roasted chili nuts, slivers of house-smoked duck and lychees in a light dressing, allowing the full flavors of each of the ingredients to radiate. I chose the cast-iron skillet seared day boat sea scallops, which were plump, sweet and tender, and were well complemented by a potato tart and a sweet corn and pea coulis. Once again my friend had salmon, choosing the Alaskan salmon fillet charcroute with Napa cabbage and applewood-smoked bacon, dressed in a mustard velouté sauce. The cabbage and bacon brought out the steak-quality of the salmon and the mustard velouté added a continental twang. We finished with a luscious chocolate torte with a raspberry sauce—savoring each decadent bite.

Hard to believe I could have eaten another morsel, but I rose on Sunday with one thought: "I wonder what Lynne's making for breakfast?" I wasn't disappointed. She and Alan sent us happily on our way with a warm poached pear in a wine sauce served with whipped ricotta cheese, Lynne's granola and Belgian waffles and sausages. Another great weekend in Spring Lake.

But if there's a flaw, it's that you can never fit everything into one weekend. The good news is you don't have to. Spring Lake's only a short drive away.

The Chateau Inn & Suites is located at 500 Warren Avenue; 732-974-2000; www.chateauinn.com. The Victoria House Bed and Breakfast is located at 214 Monmouth Avenue; 732-974-1882; www.victoriahouse.net. The Shipwreck Grille, 720 Ashley Avenue in Brielle; 732-528-6665; www.shipwreckgrill.com. The Seashell Dining Room is in The Breakers Hotel, 1507 Ocean Avenue in Spring Lake; 732-449-7700; www.breakershotel.com and Matisse is at 1300 Ocean Avenue in Belmar; 732-681-7680; www.matissecatering.com. All three restaurants are popular, so reservations are advised. Matisse is a B.Y.O.B. and the Shipwreck and the Breakers offer a full bar and excellent wine lists. ♦

Diana Cercone is associate editor of Bucks County Town & Country Living.

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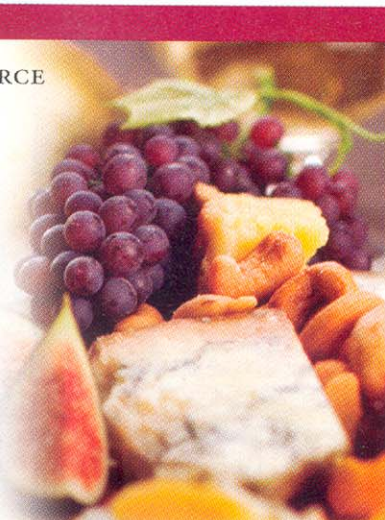
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