

# FLOWERS PROVIDE BURST OF COLOR AND FLAVOR



**Clockwise, from top left: Chili fried cauliflower with fall lentil stew is crispy fried cauliflower tossed in a house-made chili sauce served over Smita's spiced stewed lentils with coconut milk and fall vegetables. Apple cheesecake with caramel sauce. Executive chef Jessica Arends presents the squash tartine at Six Friends Cabernet, 5259 Broadway in Lancaster. The baked brie comes with a seasonal topping and is served with crostini.**

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Tasting flights (\$10) give sippers four chances to hit pay dirt from a list of vintages grown in the Finger Lakes, Niagara and Chautauqua regions. There's also a dozen straightforward choices from distant wine regions, like California, Italy and Argentina.

It's when you turn to the food that things really start to get interesting. Chef Jessica Arends is a kitchen veteran who has gotten a chance to put her creativity to work at last, and it shows.

Housemade potato chips are always a pleasure, and Six Friends Cabernet offers a hefty portion of bronzed shaved spuds as a side. If you're feeling rakish, though, step out with the gorgonzola version (\$7), accented with lots of melted blue cheese and a combination of fresh chopped herbs.

Baked brie (\$18) might seem like an '80s fern bar relic until you see what Arends is up to. The most recent treatment tops the oozy baked cheese with a German chocolate cake treatment, meaning pecans, caramel, cocoa and a sprinkling of toasted coconut.

Plus, a blossom. Many of Arends' dishes arrive crowned with their own flower arrangements, providing bursts of color and, yes, flavor. If you've never noshed on a nasturtium, the ones Arends sources from Eden's Crown Hill Farm are a revelation. They aren't just flagrantly beautiful, but deliver a burst of peppery melon with each bite.

Cider-brined pork belly (\$17) arrives in crusty-edged slices, crispy with maple glaze but yielding, alongside caramelized Brussels sprouts and whole-grain honey mustard. A squash tartine (\$16) posits roasted diced squash on a pillow of house-made ricotta, with arugula, toasted hazelnuts and a drizzle of local maple

syrup.

For hearty pasta, consider yam gnocchi with sausage (\$32), with seared dumplings jumbled with sausage, greens, apples, savory walnut granola and brown butter. The result was an autumnal romp of flavors and textures that never got boring.

Short rib beef bourguignon (\$36) brought lots of local root vegetables to the party, rallying around a fist-sized chunk of beef that came apart at a fork's tickle. Rich red-wine-based sauce, given further umami depth with Flat 12 mushrooms, gave plenty of reasons to repurpose focaccia from other plates.

Steak frites (\$26), here a 10-ounce sirloin, was grilled to a proper medium rare as requested, and fanned over red wine sauce. Heaped with truffle-oil-scented french fries and onion strings, it kept a couple of red meat fiends happy.

Lentil stew, a humble dish in basic form, turns up at Six Friends

## SIX FRIENDS CABERNET

5259 Broadway, Lancaster, [sixfriendscabernet.com](http://sixfriendscabernet.com).

**Hours:** 4 to 10 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. Closed Sunday, Monday.

**Prices:** Small plates \$6 to \$18, entrees \$18 to \$36.

**Atmosphere:** Urbane enjoyment.

**Parking:** Lot.

**Wheelchair accessible:** Yes.

**Gluten-free:** Many options

**Outside dining:** Yes.

Cabernet as a vegan tour de force, "chili-fried cauliflower with fall lentil stew" (\$26), served with toasted focaccia.

Already facing East with its coconut milk base, the dish's beguiling aroma prompted guesses around the table regarding which spices might be responsible. This was no mere curry powder. (The secret to the stew's intoxicating complexity turned out to be a custom blend by local spice guru Smita Chutke.)

Topping the potage is fried cauliflower dressed with a housemade hot sauce with a base of fermented Crown Hill Farm cayenne peppers. As an all-vegetable ensemble act, it slayed.

If you decide to pass up the German chocolate brie for dessert, I'd head straight for the apple cheesecake (\$13) with caramel sauce. Having succeeded in conveying both the lactic extravaganza of cheesecake and the fruit-and-crust pas de deux of apple pie, it's a genuine two-sport threat.

A pumpkin latte pot de crème (\$12) took pumpkin spice downtown as the spirit of a silky pudding, crowned with a cloud of lighter whipped coconut cream providing opportunity to enjoy contrasts.

Or perhaps you'd prefer the creampuff of the moment (\$12). Last I checked it was filled with cranberry mascarpone and served with cranberry compote, vanilla bean creme anglaise and, of course, a pretty blossom.

At Six Friends Cabernet, the prices are ambitious, but so is the food, with extensive use of housemade components and fresh local produce. From the dining room crowd, I'd guess there's a market for people who don't want to drive into the city for interesting plates.

If you can't line up five friends for dinner, don't worry: They also have tables for two.

Photos by Sharon Cantillon/Buffalo News