There are those who have eaten at Icarus more than a hundred times during the last 20 years and say they have never had a reason not to go back. Strong praise in an industry so rife with competition, transient workers, and fickle food trends that many restaurants go under within a few years. But Icarus, which opened in 1979 as a quirky storefront bistro in the then not-so-chic South End, has found staying power in its insistence on very fresh produce and a menu of ever-evolving flavor combinations dubbed “new American-styled” cuisine. Such reinvention is all the more remarkable since the same chef, Chris Douglass, has held sway from the start. A move in 1987 to a more sophisticated, subterranean spot kept the restaurant’s relaxed feel—yet bolstered its reputation as a romantic place to dine.

We started with the Capri white buck goat cheese salad with beets, arugula, and grilled flatbread ($10.50). The delicate crackers arrived on the plate as tall as shark’s fins, plunged into wedges of quite tangy caprino. The juicy flesh of the beets pampered the palette. The fat, moist, grilled shrimp with mango and jalapeño sorbet ($12), a signature dish since the 1980s, created an icy-sweet hotness that stunned the tastebuds. More predictable was the lobster-and-corn chowder with smoked bacon ($14). A light, milky broth settled around tiny cubes of potato, lobster chunks, and corn so rivetingly crunchy it could have been picked off the stalk in the kitchen. A comforting and authentic dish, if a bit bland.

The entrées arrived. The poached salmon with cucumber, potato cakes, and dill ($34) was a subtle array of cool flavors broken by the salty crispness of the cakes. Dill blossomed in the mouth amid the buttery-soft salmon. Delicious too was purslane—heretofore known to us as a pesky garden weed. The succulent plant was served as a tender, slightly peppery, ample garnish. A richer entrée was the seared duck breast and crisp leg with rhubarb chutney and potato galette ($29.50). Served drenched in an earthy, wine-like rhubarb sauce, the delicious, meaty duck was enough for two. The thin galette seemed too oily and crispy, however: not enough ’tater to sink your teeth into. A lighter, vegetarian dish might have better suited the heavy duck. The almond rhubarb crisp ($8.50) was served piping hot with vanilla mascarpone ice cream melting into the crannies of pastry and not overly sweet fruit. The peach sorbet ($8.50), packed with sunny flavor, was refreshing. With tip and two glasses of wine, the meal for two came to $169. The food was so good, we almost hesitate to mention one gripe: the booth we sat in seemed configured in a way that forced the diner to eat while hunched uncomfortably forward.

Overall, it’s reassuring to see Icarus—named for the mythical son of Daedalus who flew too close to the sun and perished—continue to soar for so many years, reminding us to try new things in life (like spicy hot sorbet and eating weeds) despite the inevitable risks.

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Above: The two-tiered dining room is a handsome, convivial spot.

ICARUS
3 Appleton Street
Boston. 617-426-1790
Dinner only.
Open seven days a week.
Valet parking available.

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Photograph courtesy of Icarus

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