

**MARC PENVENNE
OF MELI-MELO CREPERIE**

BY JANE AND MICHAEL STERN

Yes, Meli-Melo is a crêperie and the crêpes served in the minuscule 550-square-foot eatery are wonderful – wheat or buckwheat, warm or cool or flaming – but it's the onion soup that goes to the top of our list of dishes that demand tasting right now. Chef Marc Penvenne, who opened the happy little place in 1993, delights in telling how he starts at 6 a.m. with fifty pounds of white onions and keeps them on the fire a full twelve hours until they are sapped of their liquid and have become ten or fifteen pounds of soft concentrate of sweet onion flavor.

"Some cooks add sugar to caramelize the onions quickly," he scoffs. "But the onion has its own sweetness if you cook it long enough, and that sweetness cannot be shortcut."

Therein lies the secret of the simple excellence of Penvenne's menu: Everything is made the old-fashioned way, from scratch. "There is no great secret to my recipes," he says. "I go to the market in the Bronx two or three times every week to get the freshest produce. I do not keep food in my refrigerator. Freshness makes all the difference."

You can taste that in the crêpes wrapped around tomatoes, asparagus, avocado or summer berries; and it is abundantly evident in Penvenne's salads. But nowhere is his obsession with quality produce more evident than in the juice bar he added to his establishment a few years ago. What a joy it is to stand there and

watch fruits and vegetables reduced to their liquid essence for such bright concoctions as apple-carrot-ginger juice, banana-orange-pineapple or celery-parsley-tomato. A dozen fruits and vegetables are available on any one day: mix and match them to your taste.

Penvenne observes that the juice business is seasonal – but not as a summer passion of people eager to refresh themselves with something natural. Rather, juice sells best from Thanksgiving into January. The reason? "People eat too much and want to be virtuous," he says. "For New Year's, they make resolutions. Juice is good for that."


Juice, crêpes, soups, salads (and sandwiches and homemade ice cream, too) – these are the elements of success in a restaurant that Penvenne opened after working at the renowned Restaurant Jean-Louis and at the bakery Versailles. Before coming to Greenwich, he had spent time on St. Barths in the French West Indies and considered opening a crêperie there.

"But to be on St. Barths twelve months a year would be boring," he says. "And when it came time for the children to go to school, you would have to send them away." Greenwich, on the other hand, seemed the perfect place to realize his dream. "It is a beautiful town, a safe place for the family and for my business. The people are sophisticated. They are well traveled, and they are adventurous. I had a good feeling about crêpes before I opened here."

Meli-Melo was an immediate success. And because it has room for less than two dozen customers at a time, there is an inevitable wait at lunchtime (it is open every day of the year except Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day), but the wait is seldom too long. "We are not comfortable enough for anyone to come



for a meal of two hours," Penvenne notes. "Not even one hour!" Furthermore, over half the space of his storefront is devoted to cooking and prep work – an essential use of space given the fact that the menu offers twenty-three different kinds of buckwheat crêpes, nineteen wheat crêpes, six crêpes flambés, a dozen sandwiches including the classic croque monsieur, and seventeen salads. There is something on this menu for everyone to like.

To ease some of the pressure, Penvenne took over a place down the street where he has a 1,270-square-foot kitchen for his popular catering business and to provide support for the restaurant. Still, to speak with him is to converse with a culinary whirlwind. "The restaurant business is twenty-four hours a day," he says. "To enjoy it, you have to want to do a thousand things all at the same time. That, I do." 

MELI-MELO CREPERIE

362 GREENWICH AVENUE
GREENWICH
203 • 629 • 6153

Cuisine: French

Hours: 10 a.m.–10 p.m.

Entrées: \$6–\$17

Credit cards: All major credit cards